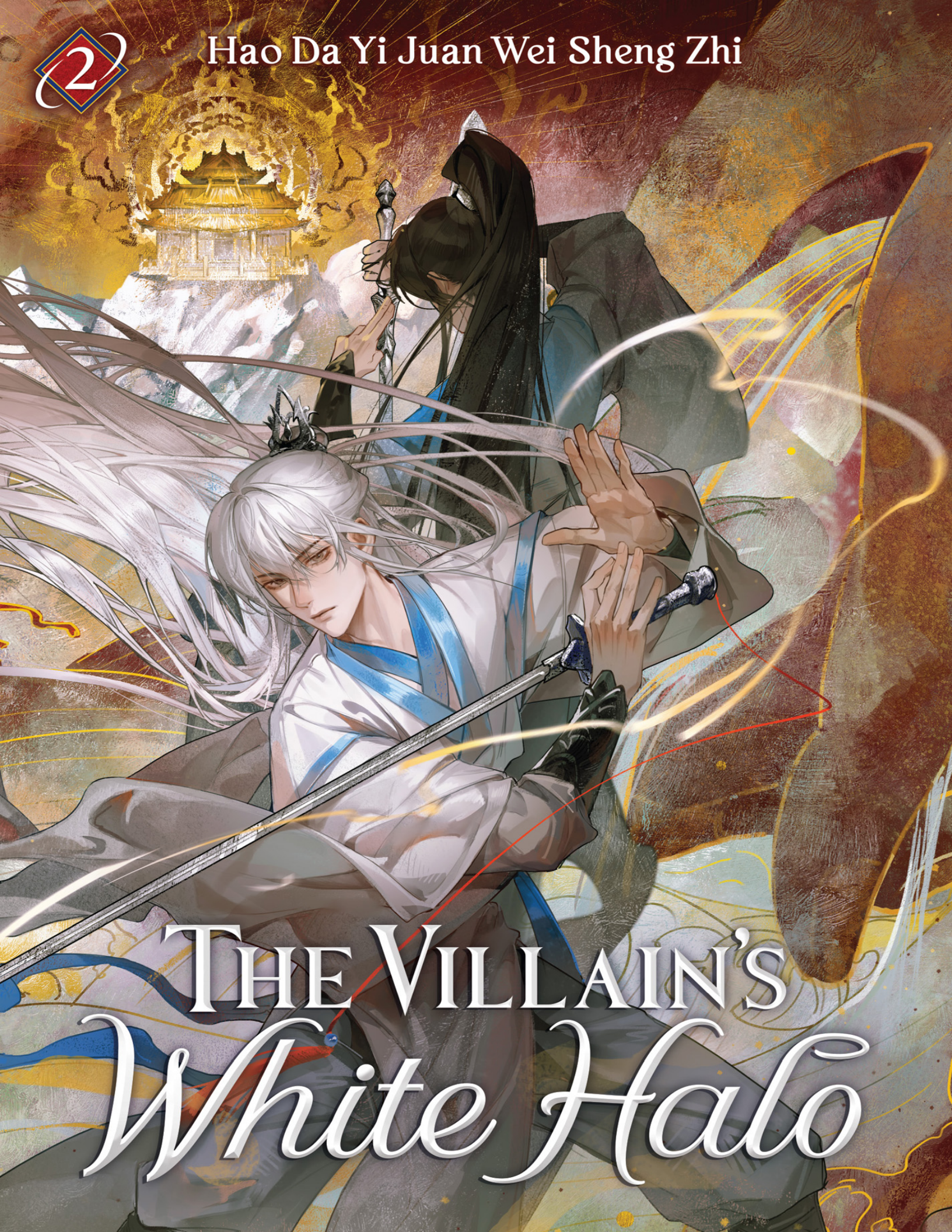
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Hao Da Yi Juan Wei Sheng Zhi
THE VILLAIN'S
White Halo

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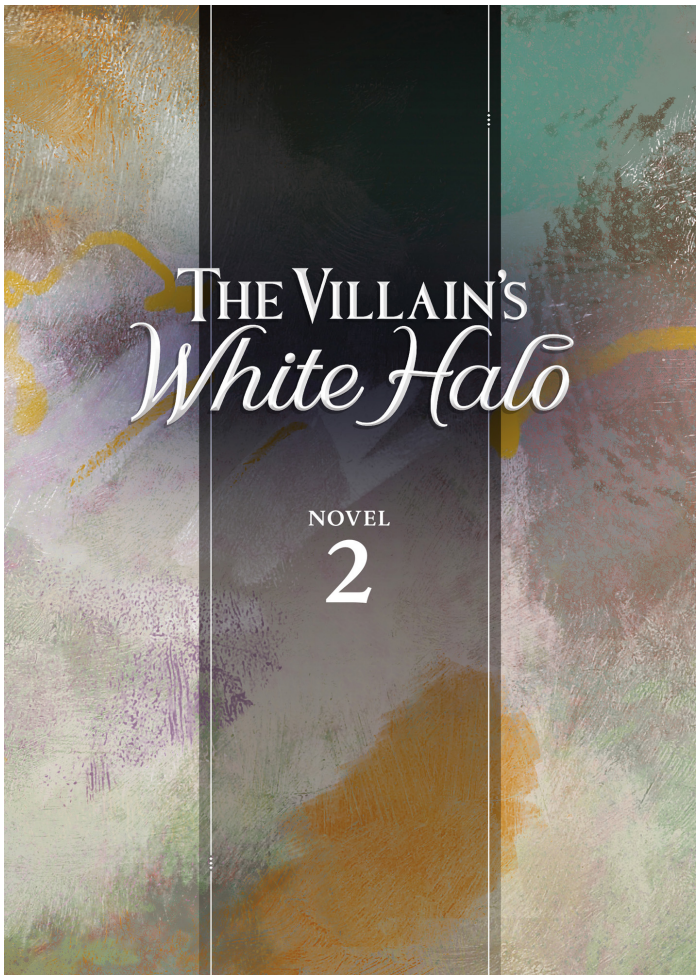
THE VILLAIN'S
White Halo
NOVEL
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THE VILLAIN'S *White Halo*

NOVEL
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 43

THE MOON TRAVELED WESTWARD over the cluster of courtyards by Qiushui Lake. Only the chirping of summer insects and the rustling of leaves in the wind broke the silence.

Luo Mingchuan's room faced Qiushui Lake. Unlike his nearly out-of-control emotions during the day, the lake's clear and calm surface reflected the moon's bright glow. He opened a window and the night breeze rushed in. The chill against his face brought clarity to his mind; it was time to sort out his thoughts.

In the dungeon, he'd learned it was his own drunken behavior that had caused his shidi to stray from the right path. His initial decision to descend the mountain with Yin Biyue was driven by his guilty desire to make amends and guide his shidi away from his obsession. When had things changed? Why had Shidi insisted on trading Headmaster-xiansheng's notes with him on the shore of the Floating Sea? He wasn't sure, but a gut feeling told him Yin Biyue had been protecting him.

When they'd shared drinks under the bright moon, Yin Biyue had leaned against him and had spoken of wanting to live a peaceful life. At that time, Luo Mingchuan still hadn't understood his own heart.

Until today.

Until Yin Biyue confessed that he already liked someone.

The night wind rustled Luo Mingchuan from his hazy thoughts. He had cultivated for over ten years and was unafraid of his feelings. He thought he might also like his shidi. But what about Yin Biyue? He was still so young, so innocent—could he really distinguish between brotherly affection for his shixiong and a desire for a lasting union?

Luo Mingchuan gazed at the rippling lake. It didn't matter. He would be patient.

From the academy to the Cangya Mountains, from his shidi's thirteenth year to his twenty-third, Luo Mingchuan would be present. He

would remain so for every year of Yin Biyue's life from now on.

His mind now clear, Luo Mingchuan entered meditation and began training the Ghara Pupil Technique.

***

YIN BIYUE WAS UNABLE TO FOCUS during meditation. He moved from his cushion to his desk, lit a lamp, and began polishing his sword. These days, he found that caring for his sword was a beneficial habit that calmed the mind. The three-foot, sharp blade glimmered in the candlelight. It reflected his face as well as any mirror.

Miss Qu was lovely. Her family background, appearance, and talent in cultivation were all impeccable. He didn't understand why he'd instinctively rejected her. Shouldn't he have been happy to receive her proposal?

Should I have said, "My heart belongs to the Dao. How can worldly love bind me?"

No, that sounded like something his elder shixiong or shifu would say. Unlike them, he had no desire for solitary enlightenment. What about the turmoil and looming dangers in the world's present situation? Sure. That could count as a reason. Were there any others?

Yin Biyue revisited his earlier state of mind and realized that rather than needing to give an immediate rebuff, his instinct had been to prevent Luo Mingchuan from misunderstanding the situation. He wasn't sure why. Was he afraid of being caught in an early romance by a guiding figure? No, that wasn't it. Maybe it was because he played the role of a small-time villain for so long, and girls usually had no interest in him, that the sudden arrival of a goddess-tier lady like Qu Duiyan threw him off his game.

Yeah. That had to be it.

The candlelight dimmed. His sword gleamed in the fading light, and at last he felt calm. Whatever the situation with Miss Qu, there were more pressing matters at hand.

***

THE DRAW RESULTS OF the Flower-Plucking Tournament would be announced the next day. This round, Yin Biyue and the other two would not be drawing. They had to wait for others to pick their names. Duan Chongxuan volunteered to check the results at the Wall of Sunken Shadow bright and early that morning. He returned looking dazed and shaken.

Yin Biyue found that reaction concerning. “Who matched you?”

“Huide, the Buddhist cultivator from Xingshan Temple.”

“And what are your odds of winning?”

“They’re around 70 percent. Not a 70 percent chance of him winning—it’s 70 percent for me.”

“Isn’t that good?” Yin Biyue was even more puzzled now. “Who matched Luo-shixiong?”

“Feng Wenjin from Qinglu Sword Sect.”

Yin Biyue glanced at Luo Mingchuan. That wasn’t a worrying matchup either.

Duan Chongxuan finally looked directly at Yin Biyue with a troubled expression. “Sishixiong, Zhong Shan drew you.”

The three fell silent.

“Well…it was bound to happen sooner or later,” Yin Biyue said, even though he hadn’t expected the matchup so early. He’d thought for sure that he wouldn’t face Zhong Shan until the fifth round.

“What do you think are your odds for winning?” Duan Chongxuan asked.

“I’d say 40 percent.”

The chatterbox sighed in awe. “Spot-on, same as the betting odds.”

“You bet on me?” Yin Biyue shouldn’t have been surprised, but he was.

“Of course!”

“My bad. I would’ve told you to bet on Zhong Shan.” Even Yin Biyue wanted to bet on Zhong Shan after watching his previous matches.

Duan Chongxuan snapped open his fan and began fanning himself calmly. “No worries, no worries. I didn’t bet much at all, just a drop in the bucket…” He didn’t dare mention the actual sum he’d put down, lest Yin Biyue worry.

Luo Mingchuan had been quiet, but when he finally spoke, his voice carried a strangely calming power: “Don’t be too agitated. There’s always a way. Shidi has a winning chance.”

His words settled Yin Biyue as easily as a soothing spring breeze. “Right. I’ll give it my all and come out without regrets.”

***

UNBEKNOWNST TO THE THREE by Qiushui Lake, in the Wutong Garden of Qinglu Sword Sect, Cheng Tianyu was asking the same question.

“Shixiong, what are your odds of winning?”

“They’re at 60 percent,” Zhong Shan replied.

“Shixiong, you’re too modest.” Cheng Tianyu laughed. “I’d say at least eighty!”

Zhong Shan shook his head. “No. It’s sixty.”

Cheng Tianyu frowned with disbelief.

Song Tang patted his head and smiled. “Your shixiong knows best. Go practice your sword.”

***

THE LONG-ANTICIPATED DUEL arrived with unexpected haste. The two duelists weren't the only ones surprised by their early matchup. Once the news spread, a fresh set of observers traveled to Ye City to watch the fight.

Amid the rumors swirling across the Southern Continent, a letter Song Tang had requested from the Central Continent arrived. The package contained copies of every essay Yin Biyue had written during his three years at the academy.

"Information about him is scarce after he joined Cangya. This was the best we could do."

Zhong Shan flipped through the thin pages. "This is enough."

***

YIN BIYUE STUDIED the scraps of paper Duan Chongxuan had given him. The papers varied in size and quality, from neat writing to mere chicken scratch. Some contained details about Zhong Shan's life before joining Qinglu Sword Sect. Others were sketches of the angles and trajectories of his sword's momentum. The information was scattered, and much of it seemed useless, but Yin Biyue pored over it seriously.

"That's all I could dig up." Duan Chongxuan seemed embarrassed by what he'd found.

Even if only half the information was relevant, it was already beyond Yin Biyue's hopes and far surpassed anything he'd expected from their resident chatterbox. "This is already helpful."

***

FROM SUNRISE TO LONG PAST SUNSET, Yin Biyue stood at the window. Countless images flashed through his mind when he closed his eyes. It was as though he was reliving Zhong Shan's first sixteen years.

Fame at a young age, immersed in the path of the sword, solitary and persistent. After he joined Qinglu Sword Sect, however, the images became blurry.

The Tempest Sword Manual was famous; it wasn't some secret style. At least forty disciples in Qinglu Sword Sect practiced it, and even Lanyuan Academy's archives contained records about it. But there was only one true Fengyu Sword. Millions of years ago in the Age of Sages, it had been the weapon of a Sage, damaged in the Great Dao-Demon War and later collected by Qinglu Sword Sect. They'd exhausted ten years and expended great effort to restore it, just to recover 70 percent of its original power.

When Zhong Shan had been eighteen, he'd demonstrated his understanding of the Tempest Sword amid the Qinglu Mountains. Afterward, the Second Sage Zhou Yuandao had decided the sword should be passed to him.

Zhong Shan lived up to expectations. By twenty, he'd grasped the true essence of the Tempest Sword Style and been hailed on the Southern Continent as the person most likely to reach the Sage level in the next three hundred years.

The massive collection of fragmented information was disassembled, reassembled, and filtered through Yin Biyue's mind. He felt himself drawing closer to understanding Zhong Shan. After a while, he opened his eyes and exhaled deeply. Thanks to Duan Chongxuan's efforts and his own visualizations, he was pumped up. He thought his chance of winning now was more like fifty-fifty. An improvement!

Exhilarated, he stepped out into the courtyard and took some deep breaths to steady himself. When he lifted his eyes, he noticed the lamp was lit in Luo Mingchuan's room, his shadow faintly visible against the paper window.

Shixiong is still awake? It looks like he's writing something.

On any other night, Yin Biyue would have ignored it. Tonight, however, he was so happy that he boldly—and impolitely—knocked on Luo Mingchuan's window with barely restrained excitement.

"Shixiong, are you up?"

There came the sound of rustling paper, followed by the window pushing open from within. Luo Mingchuan had indeed been writing at his desk.

"Shidi, the night is cold and damp. Why are you standing out there?" Luo Mingchuan opened the door to usher Yin Biyue inside. As expected, his shidi's body temperature was even lower at night.

Yin Biyue allowed himself to be beckoned inside but subconsciously thought it inappropriate to go further. He lingered by the desk instead of entering the room properly.

"Shixiong, I have good news to tell you!" he said.

Luo Mingchuan had adhered to propriety all his life; never had he shared a room with anyone so late at night. At least in the academy's Hall of Night Study, there'd been others around. At least when they'd drunk wine on the roof, they hadn't been indoors…

He was flustered and his thoughts nearly spiraled, but he chastised himself for being less forthright than Yin Biyue and managed to ask: "What good news?"

Yin Biyue wanted to announce his odds against Zhong Shan had risen to 50 percent, but before he could, his gaze fell on the letter on the desk. His voice died in his throat.

Luo Mingchuan remembered too late what he had been writing. He cursed inwardly, but there was nothing he could do.

Yin Biyue met his eyes. "What's this?"

On the desk lay a challenge letter. Luo Mingchuan had planned on presenting it to Zhong Shan. It was scheduled for the day before Yin Biyue's match. The wording was deliberately provocative. It was intended to incite anger and ensure Zhong Shan would want to accept the challenge.

Yin Biyue immediately understood Luo Mingchuan's plan. He intended to challenge Zhong Shan before Yin Biyue could fight him.

Ideally, he would be victorious, but even if he lost, he would exhaust much of Zhong Shan's strength. However, if anyone found out about the letter, Luo Mingchuan would open himself to significant criticism. Even setting that possibility aside, the act violated Luo Mingchuan's usual principles. It was anything but honorable.

Luo Mingchuan knew there was no way to explain the letter, so he chuckled bitterly and said nothing.

Yin Biyue carefully folded the letter up. He was sure Luo Mingchuan spent a great deal of effort coming up with his plan and drafting such an inflammatory letter. "Shixiong, I know you mean well…but you don't have to go this far for me." Seriously, he continued: "I want to try this on my own."

Chapter 44

YIN BIYUE WAITED FOR A LONG TIME before Luo Mingchuan gave a simple “All right.” With that, he carefully tucked the folded challenge letter into his sleeve. Luo Mingchuan felt both amused and awkward, like a student caught passing notes by an academy teacher. After that, they did not mention the matter again.

Yin Biyue’s match was the first of the three. As it drew closer, not even the Yihu sword continuing to refuse his vital qi could shake his calm. By the day of the match, he was as settled as a still lake, undisturbed by the slightest ripple.

When the Cangya disciples walked from Qiushui Lake to the city center, the crowd parted before them. Countless eyes landed on the disciples—on Yin Biyue. After his previous two matches, those looks carried respect and awe. From Ye City to the foot of Mount Chongming, the crowd followed at a distance. There were no whispers or hushed discussions. Whether common folk or cultivators, all felt they were about to witness a historic event.

The day before, the Qinglu Sword Sect disciples had once again inspected the protective arrays around the platforms. That morning, the area below the ring was packed with spectators. On the eastern viewing deck sat six elders from various sects, each with high seniority and formidable cultivation. This included one from Ye City.

Amid the sea of people, Yin Biyue and Zhong Shan stepped onto the platform and faced each other. Everyone waited for them to say something, even if only to introduce themselves. Unfortunately, they were destined to disappoint the massive crowd of spectators. Both were men of few words.

Zhong Shan gripped his sword at both ends and held it horizontally against his forehead, then bowed deeply. Yin Biyue returned the courtesy. Instead of the usual cupped-hand salutes, both had chosen the most formal and solemn ceremonial greetings. They were similar in height, so their swords stopped at the same level. The blades remained sheathed, their

edges hidden. But Yihu began to thrum. The hum of the blade vibrating within its scabbard sounded like sudden rain battering a lotus-filled lake. In that instant, Yin Biyue understood. Yihu's ringing cry was a furious demand: *Are there no heroes left in this age, that a mere upstart dares claim fame?*

It was challenging Fengyu!

When faced with Baopu's Eight-Trigrams Sword, Yihu hadn't reacted. When the Shuanglan dao seized the moon, the blade merely quivered. Now, just being held level with Fengyu, it grew resentful and trembled with fury. It hadn't been unresponsive before; it had been disdainful.

No one else noticed. Those who heard Yihu rattling in its scabbard assumed Yin Biyue was gathering momentum for the match ahead. When Yin Biyue straightened up again, Zhong Shan felt something had shifted during their salute. Nevertheless, his mind was steadfast. He wouldn't falter no matter how his opponent changed.

Fengyu left its sheath. The sound rang out like a howling gale. At the same time, Yihu tore free of its scabbard. Its long, mournful cry, like a crane's piercing call, drowned out the cutting wind's howl—the sound that reverberated across the field belonged to Yihu alone.

The disciples below the ring had not expected such a spectacle right from the start. The clashing of sword cries alone carried momentous force. The crowd murmured and gasped with astonishment.

A Qinglu Sword Sect elder on the viewing deck shook his head. "One burst of energy leads to decline, then exhaustion… The young are truly hot-blooded."

Those seasoned in battle agreed.

Both fighters moved simultaneously, but Zhong Shan was a breath faster. Fengyu descended first.

The spectators were surprised to see that it was the stance "Warm Rain Thawing Breeze." Drifting like a gentle wind and mild drizzle in early spring, it was the foundational stance of the Tempest Sword Style. It wasn't a strong or weak form. Rather, it was quite neutral and balanced, which meant there were many ways to counter it. At least twenty people in the

audience could neutralize it any number of ways. But Yin Biyue had no intention of neutralizing it.

He injected vital qi into the sword and let it flow like a stream through a long-dry riverbed. Yihu became an extension of his arm. The boulder of troubled thoughts that had crushed him for countless days and nights had finally shattered. How exhilarating! Why not indulge?

He pushed off the arena ground with his toes, his sword brandished, and forcefully suppressed Fengyu's momentum.

The two swords clashed like a white crane bursting through a raging storm, and the force of their collision sent shockwaves rippling outward. The morning mist dissipated in their wake. Sparks of vital qi sprayed from the blade tips like sparks of wildfire to sizzle where they fell on the platform.

"Crane Cry Above Clouds!" Yin Biyue had used the same move before, yet its power was completely different this time. It was hard to believe.

Not enough, Yin Biyue thought.

The swords parted as soon as they touched. Yin Biyue flipped in midair and landed. Searing pain shot from his wrist through his meridians like a wildfire raging across an open plain.

He glanced at the elm tree beside the ring; his landing was half an inch farther back than when he started, while Zhong Shan was in his original spot. Few noticed such minute details, but the Ye City elder saw and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

The gap in their cultivation abilities meant a gap in vital qi output. This was an unchangeable fact.

Yin Biyue began to reassess the situation. His mind raced through the calculations as he struck again.

Zhong Shan's brow creased. Prudent, meticulous, and adept at calculation—this was his initial assessment of Yin Biyue. In the match against He Lai, he allowed himself to be suppressed at the beginning and waited patiently to claim his victory with a single decisive strike. Yet the

attack just now seemed unplanned, driven by pure impulse. It fit none of the scenarios he had simulated for this duel.

Their rhythms disrupted, both fighters returned to their starting points. Yin Biyue's sword fell upon Zhong Shan once more. The blade glowed, tracing a graceful arc through the air. As if the morning mist itself had been drawn to its beauty and coalesced beneath it, the sword flowed like a spring river. Despite its soft halo, its glare flashed forward, already at Zhong Shan's face.

"Mist Enshrouds Cold Water!"

The crowd didn't understand why Yihu had become strangely tranquil and returned to an atmosphere of warm rain after the swift, fierce Crane Cry Above Clouds attack. In place of the terrifying might from before, the sword glare had turned almost ethereal, like a startled swan taking flight.

Zhong Shan took two steps back.

After his retreat, he flicked his wrist and brought his sword down. It wasn't a strike, but a flourish, as if he were standing on a ferry moored alongside a hazy river at midnight, dispersing the fog with a flutter of his sleeves. This was the closing stance of the Tempest Sword Style, "Gentle Drizzle Return Not." It was as nimble as a swallow with an unyielding resolve. Over the mist-shrouded cold river, it spread its wings and took flight into the distance.

Many in the audience were baffled, utterly lost by this turn of events. There were no shockwaves from vital qi clashing, no earth-shattering sword momentum—what were Zhong Shan and Yin Biyue doing?

The older disciples from various sects who possessed higher cultivation levels stepped in to explain:

"Yin-shixiong's Mist Enshrouds Cold Water strike may have seemed light, but the angle and distance of the sword glare were precise down to the millimeter. All of Zhong-shixiong's approaches were sealed like a misty pall over a frigid river."

"Zhong-shixiong retreated instead of advancing. Those two steps were brilliantly placed and let him find the one possible opening to use Gentle Drizzle Return Not to disperse the mist."

In one strike, Zhong Shan parted the haze. He twisted his wrist and thrust at an angle, his movements as quick and precise as a diving swallow. Yihu met it head-on. There was no sword cry, only a rustling breeze. Though the two fighters transitioned rapidly through their moves, this was no fierce confrontation. Instead, their actions were as fluid as a river or the clouds overhead. Cangya's sword technique "Wind Skims the Cold Pool" faced off against the first stance of the Feathered Raiment Sword.

The scene within the ring looked like the seasons changing. Spring rain like wine, willows like smoke, the biting chill of an early spring morning mingled with a cool afternoon shower. But some could still sense the undercurrents roiling beneath this serene beauty.

"The momentum and precision of their swords are flawless. Not a single wisp of vital qi is wasted. They are calculating and countering each other's moves in real time."

"Both are expending the minimum effort to strike and counter, waiting for an opening."

"If either lags by a fraction, if either's calculations slow by a step, the tide will turn immediately!"

Some of the audience still didn't understand what they were seeing. Why was Zhong Shan, whose cultivation level surpassed Yin Biyue's, fighting so cautiously?

"When energy and vital qi are exhausted at a steady rate, it's harder for an opponent to achieve a mid-battle breakthrough," Song Tang said to Cheng Tianyu with a mild laugh.

This was the safest approach. Once Yin Biyue's mental strength and vital qi could no longer sustain his calculations and strikes, Zhong Shan's victory was inevitable. In the end, it all came down to the gap in their cultivation. Those who had bet on Yin Biyue could only sigh in resignation.

After forty exchanges of blows, the duel settled into a strange rhythm. Yin Biyue had yet to use the Coldwater Blade. Zhong Shan, likewise, refrained from using the Tempest Sword. Their swords moved fluidly, beautiful to behold. The grass grew lush, orioles trilled, flowers bloomed, and trees stretched tall. Time slipped by unnoticed and the sun

climbed high overhead. Watching a fight like this was a pleasure. Many relaxed with a sigh and patiently awaited the final outcome.

Then, a surprised voice spoke up. “Has the wind picked up?”

Why couldn’t those below the ring feel it?

Indeed, the spectators there could only see it rustling the elm branches that stretched over the ring. It lifted the hem of Yin Biyue’s robes and fluttered past Zhong Shan’s expansive sleeves to brush over the edge of his sword—which suddenly spun and thrust downward.

A gale erupted, bending the elm tree violently at its trunk. Zhong Shan leaped high as his robes billowed like clouds in a tempest. It hadn’t been wind at all. It was the rising momentum of Fengyu!

The wind blowing through the pavilion heralds the coming mountain storm—tension raced through the crowd in anticipation of something major about to happen.

Luo Mingchuan’s pupils contracted. If Zhong Shan had seized the initiative, there was but one possibility: Yin Biyue had revealed an opening. Many thought the same, their expressions turning grave. The tide was about to turn.

Yin Biyue’s expression remained unchanged. He shifted slightly and vanished into thin air. His footwork was so swift his form flickered like a mirage, but Zhong Shan’s sword momentum dominated the ring. It blasted the platform with fierce winds. Where could he possibly hide?

He knew exactly what kind of long-prepared strike he was facing. Still, he couldn’t muster his own momentum under his opponent’s assault. All his original plans had to be scrapped. Forty or four hundred moves made no difference; he would always be the one to run out of vital qi first. Zhong Shan was far stronger than Yin Biyue had anticipated, so he *had* to let Zhong Shan take the initiative. It was the only way to break the stalemate. He had left himself open intentionally.

Although the audience couldn’t feel the wind, they heard its growl and the sound of flying sand and stones. Its roar seemed to reverberate within their consciousness. Weaker disciples even covered their ears. Abruptly, a shrill sword cry pierced the gale. Instead of chasing the mirage, it stabbed straight into empty air.

Under the crowd’s stunned gazes, blood sprayed from the void. Droplets scattered across the ring with a hiss and boiled away into white steam, leaving black scorch marks on the stone floor. This was the searing, tempestuous vital qi within the sword.

Zhong Shan had found Yin Biyue. A single thrust of his sword pierced through Yin Biyue’s protective vital qi and drove straight into flesh. Yin Biyue materialized from thin air, his left arm a mangled mess over his white robes, his face deathly pale. However, his eyes were undimmed—no, in fact, they were shining brighter than ever. His blade was within a foot of Zhong Shan.

A chill wind replaced the wild gale, and the droplets of blood froze in midair. At the cost of a bone-deep wound, he had bought himself the chance to attack. His millions of calculations culminated in this single strike.

Chapter 45

THE SWORD'S EDGE gleamed with a cold, brilliant light, like the vast Milky Way spilled across an autumn river. The night wind rose, stirring cold water, and the bright moon veiled itself in mist. This black river tide streamed toward Zhong Shan.

The moment Yin Biyue struck, Zhong Shan countered with a slash of his own and leaped away, until he reached the very edge of the ring.

His retreat was meaningless; the river barreled relentlessly ahead and slashed a thin, bloody line across his right chest. Scalding blood spilled, but before it could soak his robes, it rimed over with frost. The sword intent of Coldwater Blade had seeped into his very bones.

Unfortunately, just as Yin Biyue had evaded the full brunt of Zhong Shan's strike at the last moment, Zhong Shan also dodged Yihu's frontal force. Zhong Shan raised his blade horizontally before him, like a mighty dam, holding back the roaring tide.

Things were shifting too fast.

Yin Biyue's white robes were stained with blood. His opponent's residual sword qi, now lodged in his bones, was searing and angry and clashed terribly with the chill of Coldwater Blade. Wisps of white steam curled from the gruesome wound on his left arm. Meanwhile, Zhong Shan's face was pale. Although frost sealed his injury, Yin Biyue's sword qi rampaged through his meridians, and a stabbing pain spread all the way to his heart.

Neither of them had time to dwell on their wounds. Both sought to seize the initiative and raised their swords for another strike.

The middle-aged elder from Lianjian Sect frowned. "Is the protection array around the ring intact?"

Cangya's elder was equally concerned. "We cannot sacrifice two promising talents of the younger generation for the sake of a Flower-Plucking Tournament."

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder, gripping the core of the arrays, nodded solemnly. In a true crisis, the platform's defensive array would activate and absorb the full force of their strikes.

The disciples of the Cangya Mountains and Qinglu Sword Sect weren't as calm and composed as their elders. Their faces were white, their eyes enhanced with vital qi as they stared nervously at the ring. Cheng Tianyu was so anxious his eyes were red, and even Song Tang was concerned. Yin Biyue was stronger than they had anticipated. It wasn't just his cultivation; his synergy with his sword was extraordinary, as though they were made for each other. Luo Mingchuan's expression remained neutral, but his fists clenched tightly within his voluminous sleeves. His nails dug deep enough into his palms to draw blood.

Yin Biyue and Zhong Shan leaped into the air, their swords meeting mid-flight.

Clang!

A tremendous surge of vital qi formed an invisible curved barrier and crashed where their blades crossed. There was no rain, yet the sound of rainfall filled the air. There was no arctic lake, yet a deep chill permeated the surroundings. The disciples standing near the platform staggered back in agony. They felt as if their minds had been scoured by a storm, their bodies left adrift on a freezing river in the dead of night.

Time in the ring seemed to freeze too. The swords flashed, reflecting the blue sky, the blazing sun, and the drifting clouds. The competing sword glares illuminated their wielders' calm faces and shining eyes. An ache traveled up from Yihu's hilt, and Yin Biyue seemed to understand his opponent's sword intent.

Bitter Wind Harsh Rain.

The Ye City elder, whose cultivation allowed him to perceive the attack, nodded with admiration. "Remarkable."

This was not the most powerful attack in the Tempest Sword Manual, but it was the most difficult to master. To many disciples who practiced the Tempest Sword Style, this move was an insurmountable bottleneck.

The wind's harsh bite chills aching bones; the rain's soft sigh swallows my sorrows.[1]

How tragic this sword intent was. The Sage who'd created the Tempest Sword during the Age of Sages had known poverty and hardships in his youth, and had only attained enlightenment in middle age. This technique was his summation of those forty bitter years. Zhong Shan, who'd attained fame in his adolescence, had walked a smooth and unimpeded cultivation path. Yet he somehow grasped the loneliness and suffering embedded within this technique.

It truly was remarkable, but Song Tang wasn't surprised.

When his shidi had been young and his cultivation level low, so low he had lacked enough vital qi to protect himself, he'd still swung his sword thousands of times a day, until his hands were covered in blisters. He pushed his muscles and bones to their limits. He never left the mountain, never engaged in idle chatter or frivolous gatherings. He trained through the hottest days of summer and the coldest nights of winter, day after day without rest. The price of his early fame was enduring greater hardship—and deeper solitude.

A loneliness that threatened the mind with endless sorrow, almost too profound to describe, pulsed from the tip of Zhong Shan's sword.

Yin Biyue abruptly withdrew his strike before it was complete. Instead, he angled his blade downward as his body soared still higher, his white sleeves spread like a crane's wings. And then—Yihu slashed. Its blade radiated like shimmering lanterns doubled by their reflections in a lake's surface. It was nearing late afternoon, and sunlight was just beginning to set, but the sword's brilliance was so intense it seemed to brighten the sky. If Zhong Shan's sword was a bitter and harsh rainstorm, then Yin Biyue's was the morning sun cutting through the clouds.

It was the confidence and pride of fearing not the thousand-foot waves of a storm, the main stance in the Cangya Sword Manual: "Sunrise in the East." Many Cangya disciples gawked in disbelief. Could such an overwhelming force really come from that move?

Zhong Shan landed lightly on his feet. He raised his sword over his head and erected a barrier anew, the surface of which shimmered with specks of scattered starlight, then braced to meet the descending blade.

Dew Glistens Under Morning Sun; Stars Encircle the Purple Pole.[2]

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NOT ONLY THE SOUTHERN CONTINENT, but the entire realm was focused on this battle. Cultivators in Ye City watched the match nervously from afar, while those unable to attend eagerly awaited news from their sects and clans. But some needed no such wait.

The snow-capped peaks of the Hengduan Mountains never thawed. The highest summit was an expanse of frost where ice layered the trees. The harsh cold was so extreme that even Small Ascension cultivators could not stand it for long before buckling. An elder waited atop the mountain, his sleeves billowing in the mountain wind. With a broad forehead and long beard, he bore an expression of utter indifference. His eyes held a sharp, intimidating gleam. He was not tall, but he stood here as if he'd transcended the mortal world. A grand aura emanated from him, as though all mountains bowed before him.

And rightfully so. Why would he not be transcendent? Why wouldn't the mountains bow to him? If the Sword Sage was no more, what peak in the world could rival his height? He, too, was watching the match. Even from ten thousand miles away, he could see every glint upon their blades with perfect clarity. But he was displeased. With a crease of his brow, he flicked his sleeves.

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AT MOUNT CHONGMING, Luo Mingchuan's expression changed abruptly, and his gaze snapped upward in disbelief. Likewise, the Lianjian Sect and Ye City elders paled as their eyes turned skyward. Inside the city master's mansion, Ye Zhiqiu took his sword and ascended the highest terrace, his expression more serious than ever.

Thick clouds churned, rolling west to south, and seemed to cover the whole sky in an instant. They blotted out the blue above Mount Chongming, dimming the sun's light. In the blink of an eye, without thunder and lightning, torrential rain crashed on the battlefield and the surrounding audience. Massive raindrops scoured the fields around them all.

The disciples below the ring were caught off guard and hurried to erect vital qi barriers. "Why is it raining so suddenly?" some murmured.

After Stars Encircle the Purple Pole, the two fighters had exchanged a dozen more blows. It was dusk and the match had by now lasted nearly the whole day. Their vital qi, consciousness, and willpower were nearing their limits. Because of the gap in sword mastery and cultivation, Yin Biyue could not defeat Zhong Shan, yet neither had he lost.

When the rain came, neither had strength left to spare.

Within moments, Yin Biyue's heavy robes were soaked and weighing him down, just like his labored breathing, his strained lungs, and his meridians. The dried blood on his robes blotted with the rain, leaving crimson ink stains on his left side. The mournful wind and rain raised a confounding haze, and it reminded him of the storm during his breakthrough in seclusion. It had been just as desolate, just as murderous.

Zhong Shan's ink-splashed robes were also streaked with blood and rain. Water streamed down his brow and dripped from his sword's tip onto the platform, each drop blooming like a flower. His eyes shone brighter and brighter, as if trying to burn through the heavy curtain of rain.

"What luck! Rain at this critical moment. Zhong-shixiong's Tempest Sword can harness its power."

"Heaven sends rain, and daughters must marry. That's just how it is. Yin-shixiong can't do anything now."

Almost everyone thought this way—that this rain was Heavenly Will. Only a handful, Luo Mingchuan included, glimpsed the traces of supreme Daoist magic hidden within the dark clouds. Those halfway to Great Ascension perceived it through cultivation, while Luo Mingchuan saw it through his Ghara Pupil Technique.

Even if the world knew the clouds had been sent, few would say a word. In the hearts of mortals, the six Second Sages were akin to gods. Thunder and rain were both the Sage's grace. If a Sage wished to reshape the climate, no one would dare oppose that.

***

YE ZHIQIU STOOD ON HIS TERRACE, the city's countless lights beneath him. He gazed westward. The rain clouds currently hung over Mount Chongming, but if they drifted even two miles toward Ye City's sky, he would act without hesitation.

Beside him, an old steward trembled with anxiety. "My lord, I beg you not to raise your sword. It would be a great disrespect to the Sage."

Ye Zhiqiu did not answer, nor did he lower his blade.

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IN THE CENTRAL CONTINENT'S Yunyang City, Headmaster-xiansheng sipped tea and watched the sky from his courtyard. The gloomy weather seemed to irritate him, and he flung his teacup to the ground. It shattered, scattering tea and porcelain across the floor.

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ZHONG SHAN HAD ALREADY raised his sword toward the storm.

He took a step forward, the shallow puddle at his feet splashing upward, the droplets suspended in the air. Where his sword passed, the

falling rain twisted strangely and gathered at his blade. The storm itself became his sword.

“Besieging Storm!”

Some expected Zhong Shan to grow stronger from borrowing the storm’s power, but none had anticipated *how* strong. His sword’s momentum surpassed the limits of the Breakthrough level, touching the threshold of Small Ascension. He appeared to be on the verge of a mid-battle advancement!

Others realized this strike was no longer just Zhong Shan’s own cultivation—it was the inherent might of the Fengyu sword, the divine weapon itself, unleashed at last. To think a mere rainstorm had excited it to such heights.

No one believed Yin Biyue could withstand this unbelievable strike. What could he possibly use? What hope did he have? Unleashing the Coldwater Blade? Zhong Shan had already claimed the storm—where could Yin Biyue borrow power?

Should he dodge instead? How could anyone evade a squalling sky?

Yin Biyue stood in the downpour with his robes drenched, like a desperate, isolated city under siege. He had no hope of reinforcements.

Chapter 46

THE YE CITY ELDER in attendance sighed. “The Sword Sage’s disciple cannot win…unless he also possesses a divine weapon, such as ‘Linyuan.’”

All the prominent figures watching this match thought the same. Faced with the unleashed might of Fengyu itself, what weapon forged in the Age of Spiritual Decline could withstand it? And did Yin Biyue have Linyuan? Of course not. The whole world knew that Linyuan had been reforged by the Sword Sage into Chunshan Xiao and Qiufeng Li.

Amid the besieging storm, Yin Biyue gazed at the sky. Dark clouds churned endlessly above, as if night had arrived early. The gloom loomed so oppressively overhead it threatened to crush the city. The fierce wind drove icy rain against his face, yet Yin Biyue seemed oblivious, because his heart was colder.

Was this the inviolable will of the universe?

Though only an instant passed, countless images flashed through his mind. The lifetimes spent as a thwarted villain, the mist-shrouded Cangya Mountains, the academy courtyard lined with locust trees and the teachers there, the deep blue of the Floating Sea, the vibrant, lantern-lit Ye City… And on the rooftop, where the moon had cast its reflection upon Qiushui Lake, the chilled night breeze mixed with the fragrance of wine.

At the time, he’d said he wanted to live a peaceful life.

This rain… Do the heavens mean to end me? But I didn’t come to this world to submit to Heaven’s Will.

Beneath the edge of the coming blade, Yin Biyue smiled faintly at the sky. Yihu quivered, as if laughing as well. He drew his sword and slashed toward heaven. The strike didn’t target Zhong Shan nor the storm. It cleaved straight up—toward the oppressive black clouds!

Boom!

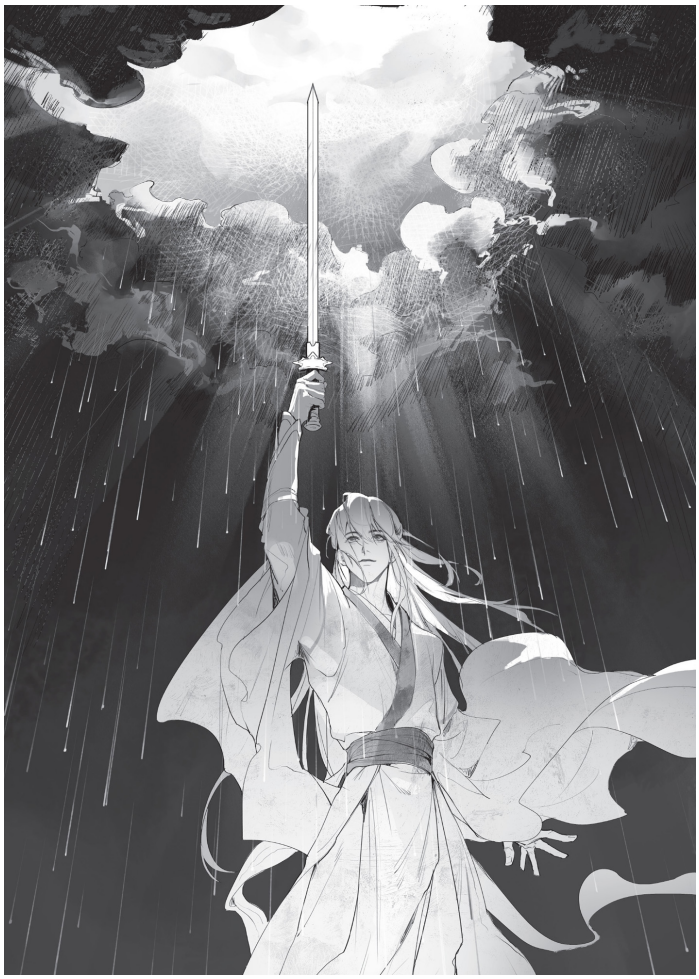
The spectators on the viewing deck widened their eyes. Caught off guard, the disciples below the ring slammed their eyes shut in a panic. Even so, the light was so brilliant it threatened to penetrate their eyelids and beam directly into their minds.

Boundless light converged on this single strike, as if the sun itself had been forcibly dragged back to the mortal realm. The foot of Mount Chongming blazed as bright as noon.

No rain fell in Ye City, save for a few scattered droplets that drifted over from Mount Chongming on the wind. The city folks saw what looked like a bolt of lightning splitting the sky, but the light did not fade. Instead, it grew ever brighter. They opened their windows, stepped out into their yards, gathered on the streets under umbrellas, and stared in astonishment toward the mountain.

The light grew blinding, so much that the crowds began to scatter. Some fled home while others rushed toward underground shelters. Mothers covered the eyes of their crying children and ducked into nearby shops. Black-armored guards sprinted through streets and alleys, shouting orders and reassuring the citizens.

“Do not panic! The Flower-Plucking Tournament is currently running normally! The city’s arrays are intact! Do not panic!”



At the sight of the familiar guards, the citizens relaxed, though still the light did not fade.

Through the rifts in the black clouds, golden rays beamed. Yin Biyue stood within the boundless light, his sword raised, as he forced the storm back.

The Baopu Sect elder recognized the technique and shrieked, “Broad Daylight!”

Then, something even more unbelievable happened. The golden light behind the clouds intensified, piercing through the rain to bathe the dueling platform. The thick clouds quickly dispersed, revealing the setting sun in the blink of an eye. The rain ceased.

The prominent figures of the world turned their shocked gazes toward Yunyang City in the Central Continent and wondered: *What has gotten into the Sages today?*

In the academy, Headmaster-xiansheng brewed a fresh pot of tea, his fingers trembling imperceptibly.

From the terrace of his mansion, City Master Ye Zhiqiu finally descended.

Atop the Hengduan Mountains of Baopu Sect far in the distance, the elder who had flicked his sleeve glanced coldly toward the Central Continent. But he didn’t do anything more.

The storm and light faded away completely. Blood trickled from Yin Biyue’s lips onto the platform. Zhong Shan knelt on one knee, his sword propping him up. Crimson stained the puddle before him.

How did one break through a storm? Only with light. Only with the Broad Daylight Sword.

Six hundred years ago, the Sword Sage had used this technique to disable the Baopu Sect’s grand elder. Now, six hundred years later, Yin Biyue used this technique to destroy Zhong Shan’s Besieging Storm. Heaven looked as if it’d been cleaved cleanly into two halves by the sword’s radiance. One side burned with the sunset’s fiery splendor, while the other deepened into post-storm indigo, somber as ink. Such an extraordinary scene, yet no one had eyes for it.

The venue was dead silent as the audience watched the two fighters.

Only when Luo Mingchuan shot toward the ring did the crowd snap back to reality. Someone gasped. Then, like cold water hitting hot oil, the foot of Mount Chongming erupted in an uproar. Countless people began to cheer. They didn't know what they were celebrating, only that their hearts swelled with an uncontrollable emotion they couldn't describe. Waves of exhilarated hollers echoed straight through the clouds. After watching the match, many felt signs of breakthrough within themselves.

Disciples from Cangya and Qinglu Sword Sect rushed the platform. Buddhist cultivators adept in medicine from Xingshan Temple and Jiekong Temple also hurried over to tend the wounded. The elders on the eastern viewing deck produced precious elixirs, only to realize Duan Chongxuan had already fed the two fighters pills that were superior in quality.

Amid the chaos, all Yin Biyue saw were overlapping figures. His vision blurred, and the cacophony around him sounded distant, unreal. His consciousness was a turbulent sea; tearing agony rent every inch of his meridians. His body had long ago reached its limits. Somehow, he kept his eyes open and held his sword in a death grip. He refused to relax in the slightest.

Until he sensed that familiar warmth and scent.

Until he fell into a warm embrace.

At last, his legs gave out, and he sank into peaceful oblivion.

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THE DARK CLOUDS VANISHED, leaving clear skies in all directions. If not for the lingering puddles, no one would know that only moments before it had stormed. Nonetheless, from Ye City to the five continents of the realm, many prominent figures were still deep in silence.

This duel's twists and turns had bordered on theatrical. On the surface, two young geniuses had crossed blades. Beneath, two Second Sages had clashed—shifting the world with a mere flip of the sleeve and a

thrown teacup. No one had believed Yin Biyue could win. Not unless he wielded a divine weapon that could rival Fengyu, like Linyuan. And then it turned out he *did* have one.

After a long pause, someone finally said something.

“What exactly are Yihu’s origins?”

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder shook his head slowly. “Is that sword really Yihu?” he asked himself.

Many couldn’t fathom why Second Sage Yu Shi had intervened. At his level, even subtle actions risked attracting the attention of the Heavenly Will. He had to consider karmic consequences. To a towering Sage, the Flower-Plucking Tournament should have been beneath his notice.

Some speculated it was because Yin Biyue had captured the true essence of the Sunrise in the East strike, and it was too similar to Broad Daylight, dragging up humiliating memories of the massacre by the Ba River. Baopu Sect had lost five elders, and only one had survived in a debilitated state.

Those who guessed this didn’t dare voice it out loud. The grudges between Sages were matters of the heavens, not for mortal tongues.

Still, who could have foreseen that Yu Shi’s dislike of Sunrise in the East would lead to Yin Biyue delivering the genuine Broad Daylight attack? Through this twist of fate, he’d inadvertently slapped the Sage in the face. It was an unbelievable, unthinkable act. Headmaster-xiansheng’s attitude also gave them pause. Many felt his immediate willingness to oppose the world’s strongest Second Sage proved him the Sword Sage’s truest friend.

Regardless of the undercurrents, the duel’s most direct impact was on its two fighters.

Before this match, when Yin Biyue was mentioned, he was referred to as “the Sword Sage’s disciple, Yin Biyue.” Now, he earned his own title: “Yihu Sword Yin Biyue.”

This match would be recorded in countless texts for future generations, wherein they’d call it “Half City’s Tempest, Half City’s Lake.”

As for Zhong Shan, though he’d broken a rib, his meridians were intact with no lasting or latent damage to his cultivation. In fact, after seven

days of unconsciousness, he awoke not weakened, but having advanced directly to the Small Ascension level.

No matter how the outside world buzzed, Luo Mingchuan paid no heed. His eyes were dark as the abyssal sea. He remained at Yin Biyue's bedside, holding his wrist and channeling a steady stream of vital qi into him.

Yin Biyue drifted in and out of sleep. It felt like hot spring waters were flowing through his meridians to spread warmth across his body. It was so soothing and pleasant that he never wanted to wake. Whenever he opened his eyes, Luo Mingchuan was at his bedside. At times, Duan Chongxuan was there as well.

Each time he berated himself for his laziness and tried to get out of bed, Luo Mingchuan would tell him with a smile, "Rest a bit longer. It's all right." Seven days passed this way.

Chapter 47

WHEN YIN BIYUE fully regained consciousness, it was late at night a full week later.

His vital qi had circulated through his meridians for one full cycle, and he'd never felt so refreshed. His meridians had widened, and his vital qi felt more concentrated. The wound on his left arm no longer hurt at all. It was only a bit itchy as it healed. His cultivation, originally at the early Breakthrough level, had now directly advanced to mid stage.

Beside his bed, Luo Mingchuan smiled. "Shidi, are you awake? Do you feel unwell anywhere?"

In the flickering warm glow of candlelight, his face was bathed in a soft halo, and the twinkle in his eyes was illuminated by the flame. Yin Biyue suddenly felt his own face heat up.

"No. I even broke through to the next level… Shixiong, how long have I been asleep? What time is it now?"

He lowered his eyes to avoid Luo Mingchuan's gaze, only to notice Luo Mingchuan held his wrist. How had he not realized that earlier? Were his senses dull from sleeping too much, or had this been the norm for the past few days, to the point he'd grown accustomed to it? The thought made his face burn hotter.

Luo Mingchuan grinned without guile. "Seven days. It's three quarters past midnight."

"I've been lying down too long," Yin Biyue said as he sat up. "My bones feel stiff. I'll take a walk."

"All right." Luo Mingchuan smoothly released Yin Biyue's wrist, then bent to pick up the boots by the bedside as if to help him put them on.

"Shixiong. I'm fine, really," Yin Biyue said hurriedly. He snatched the boots and put them on himself.

He wanted to take a walk partly because he felt uncomfortable after lying down for so long, but also because of the awkward realization that he'd been sleeping in Luo Mingchuan's bed this whole time.

When Yin Biyue pushed the door open, Luo Mingchuan only paused to drape a cloak over his shoulders. He followed Yin Biyue without a word.

The chilly night wind cooled Yin Biyue's flushed face. Standing in the courtyard, he recalled the events of the duel.

In the pouring rain, he'd raised Yihu and slashed toward the sky with Broad Daylight, breaking Zhong Shan's Besieging Storm, but the sheer magnitude of the strike had severely drained Yin Biyue's vital qi and mental strength. Luo Mingchuan had rushed to support him, and in his daze, he vaguely remembered Duan Chongxuan feeding him a pill.

The days that'd followed the fight had been a haze of half sleep. He recalled Luo Mingchuan channeling his own vital qi to nourish Yin Biyue's meridians and diffuse the effect of the medicine. His rise to a higher level was partly due to insights he'd gained in battle and the high-grade pill, but was mostly thanks to Luo Mingchuan's seven days of care.

Realizing this, Yin Biyue berated himself. After tending to him for so long, Shixiong must've been exhausted. Yet the moment Yin Biyue woke up, his mind had wandered to nonsense. How shameful! A noble man was open and forthright. The bond between a shixiong and a shidi ran deep. There was *no* need to overthink things.

Now that Yin Biyue was awake once more, countless questions flashed through his mind. Who had wiped away the blood? He felt refreshed and was even dressed in a new robe. It was a size too big, so it couldn't have been one of his. It probably belonged to Luo Mingchuan.

Yin Biyue turned to Luo Mingchuan. "Shixiong," he said earnestly, "I am deeply grateful for your care. I have no way to repay you, except…"

Except for what? Yin Biyue faltered. Suddenly, he knew that if he continued down this path, it'd sound weird. Even if he couldn't pinpoint why.

"Um, except to take care of you in the future if the chance arises!"

Yes, that was it.

The amusement in Luo Mingchuan's eyes deepened. "It was only my duty, so no thanks are needed. As for the future… I'm sure the chance will come."

They stood under the tree, chatting as the night breeze brushed past and the moon hung full and bright above. Yin Biyue felt no urge to sleep, but when he remembered that Luo Mingchuan hadn't had a proper rest in days, he insisted on escorting him back to his room.

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AT DAWN THE NEXT DAY, Duan Chongxuan emerged from his room just in time to see his fourth shixiong striding out with his sword, seemingly headed for practice.

"Sishixiong, you're up! How do you feel? Huh? Hey, Shixiong, your cultivation advanced again, didn't it?"

Yin Biyue had planned on seeking out Duan Chongxuan after training. He smiled. "I feel excellent. I did break through. Thank you for that pill. I see you're up early. You've grown much more diligent than before."

"What are you saying, Shixiong? There's no need for thanks." Duan Chongxuan returned Yin Biyue's smile sheepishly. "With you growing stronger, I'll have to work harder myself. It's a lot of pressure! Zhong Shan too. Word from Qinglu Sword Sect is, he also advanced to the Small Ascension level in one fell swoop. That's honestly so…" Duan Chongxuan couldn't think of a better word for it. "*So* much pressure."

"Zhong Shan was already a hair's breadth away from Small Ascension. As long as you cultivate diligently, in the future—"

A knock interrupted them. "I, Song Tang of Qinglu Sword Sect, accompanied by my shidi, have come to pay a visit. Apologies for the intrusion."

Duan Chongxuan looked bewildered. He hadn't expected the devils to show up just because he was speaking of them. He opened the gate and

welcomed the trio in. After exchanging greetings in the courtyard, the first to speak wasn't Song Tang, but the brand-new Small Ascensioner, Zhong Shan. An overwhelming aura surged around him, though it was not intentional; he hadn't yet mastered reining in his new strength. He turned to Duan Chongxuan.

"My breakthrough owes much to your pill. As I currently possess nothing of equivalent worth, I am willing to swear a heartblood oath to repay you in the future." He bowed deeply. Though he was now two levels above Duan Chongxuan, his etiquette was impeccable, without a trace of discomfort.

Duan Chongxuan sidestepped the bow. He waved his hands frantically as if to dispel Zhong Shan's obvious intent. "No, don't, absolutely do not! It was just a pill! I've got plenty in my pocket! I could eat them like candy if I wanted!"

That was a blatant lie. When he left home, his father had given him five such pills to save his life. The current stock in the entire realm was only ten. Nevertheless, Duan Chongxuan had given one away not because he expected a favor in return, but simply because he'd wanted to.

"The healers from Xingshan Temple said it was a Dragoncloud Pill," Song Tang said.

Yin Biyue was startled by this information. He knew it had been high-grade medicine, but not *that* high. A single Dragoncloud Pill could mend even shattered meridians. Its potency was so immense that an uninjured person consuming it would be unable to withstand the power and implode.

But he wouldn't voice his thanks again; he would merely remember it in his heart.

Cheng Tianyu, ever the child, had already forgotten his quarrel with Duan Chongxuan. "My master gave me plenty of good stuff before I left the mountain, but none of them can compare to a Dragoncloud Pill," he blurted out. "I can't repay you with inferior goods. Just think about it. Is there anything you want?"

As disciples of Zhou Yuandao, the Second Sage of Qinglu Sword Sect, the trio had come from abundance. But after pooling their possessions

the night before, they'd been shocked to find they still couldn't match the pill's worth.

After their multiple meetings during the Flower-Plucking Tournament, Duan Chongxuan had come to understand this trio's personalities. He knew they would never accept charity. An idea came to him, and he turned to Song Tang with a serious expression.

"I don't need any repayment, but there is one thing I'd like to request of you, Junior Sect Leader Song. If it troubles you, feel free to refuse."

Song Tang smiled. "Speak freely."

Duan Chongxuan cleared his throat. "I've heard about the incident involving my sanshixiong, Yan Xing… His loose tongue was his own fault, but please let me first apologize on his behalf. He was drunk at the time and never meant to insult you. He's been filled with regret ever since. I wouldn't dare ask you to forgive him outright, only that if you meet in the future, you might hear him out before drawing your sword."

"Sweeter than his name" or whatever he said was honestly so… Yin Biyue recalled their unreliable third shixiong's words and joined Duan Chongxuan in a half bow.

Cheng Tianyu was a little nervous, worried this topic might embarrass his shixiong. To his surprise, Song Tang responded and accepted the request right away.

"Very well. If we meet again, I won't strike first." He certainly had been angry over the incident with Yan Xing and had been frustrated with the rumors flying across the Southern Continent, but as time passed, he no longer cared.

Duan Chongxuan beamed. "That settles it, we're even." Seeing Zhong Shan looking uneasy, he continued, "And don't mention the heartblood oath again. If you dare swear one, I'll risk a backlash on myself to find a way to break it!"

Zhong Shan pursed his lips and said nothing more.

After the trio departed, Duan Chongxuan heaved a long sigh of relief and twirled his fan as he paced in the courtyard. "I'm so impressed with

myself! Sanshixiong *must* treat me to drinks now! Duan Chongxuan, you're so amazing!"

Yin Biyue, already used to him acting one way in front of others and another behind closed doors, watched in amusement as he congratulated himself. That was when something important hit him.

"Can heartblood oaths be broken by the recipient?"

"Of course not! I was bluffing," the chatterbox replied. "Not even the one who swears it can break it, so what can the recipient do?"

Yin Biyue's heart sank. Luo Mingchuan had also sworn a heartblood oath.

At Xihua Peak, his crimson blood had dripped as he vowed, *"I will obtain the Thousand-Leaf Lotus of Ming Lake for Shidi, or else I will never advance in my cultivation!"*

I will never advance in my cultivation.

Since arriving in Ye City, Luo Mingchuan had remained at the peak of the Breakthrough level, unable to progress further. Several times, Yin Biyue thought he was on the verge of a breakthrough, but it never came. Thinking of this pained him. He wished he could turn back time and return to that moment, rush forward, and clamp a hand over his shixiong's mouth. *You can eat whatever,* he would tell him, *but you can't* say *whatever!*

As if reading his thoughts, Duan Chongxuan grinned. "Sishixiong, the Thousand-Leaf Lotus is as good as yours now. There's nothing to worry about!"

"Isn't there another round?"

"Only eighteen participants remain for the next round. From here, it won't be random draws anymore but ranked challenges…"

Just then, Luo Mingchuan opened the courtyard gates and entered. Duan Chongxuan blinked. "Luo-shixiong, didn't you have a match today?"

He'd planned to attend with Yin Biyue, but the Qinglu trio's visit had delayed them.

Having slept through the past several days, Yin Biyue had missed Duan Chongxuan's latest match. He also hadn't realized Luo Mingchuan's

match was today. He felt a slight pang of guilt.

But Luo Mingchuan just smiled. “I did.”

“You didn’t go?” Yin Biyue asked worriedly.

“It’s already over.”

Already…already over…? Yin Biyue glanced at the sky.

It had surely been a one-strike victory.

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WITH THE FOURTH ROUND of the Flower-Plucking Tournament concluded, eighteen contestants advanced to the ranked phase, where the tournament transitioned from random draws to direct challenges.

The Administration Hall of the Qinglu Sword Sect drafted a preliminary ranking list based on each disciple’s displayed combat strength and cultivation. Lower-ranked disciples could challenge those above them. After each duel, rankings would be adjusted accordingly. The final ranks would solidify in eighteen days when the tournament ended, barring further challenges. The new format was more flexible, with match times negotiable. As long as a ring was free, evening duels were permissible.

The day the rankings appeared on the Wall of Sunken Shadow, handwritten copies flooded Ye City’s streets. It came complete with each contestant’s mentors, background, techniques, weapons, and past match results. Duan Chongxuan brought back one such booklet, along with gossip.

“Yin Biyue? I won’t fight him. He even beat Zhong Shan.”

“Nope, nope. Never mind Broad Daylight, I can’t even handle Sunrise in the East!”

“Hah? You callin’ me a coward?! You fight him then!”

The conclusion was, *no one* wanted to face Yin Biyue.

Duan Chongxuan flipped through the ranking booklet. “Sishixiong, I think you’re getting another free pass.”

Yin Biyue scanned the list to find he was ranked first. The accompanying note read: *Yihu Sword Yin Biyue—mid-stage Breakthrough level. Disciple of the Sword Sage. Broke Besieging Storm with Broad Daylight. Combat power rivals early-stage Small Ascension.*

Luo Mingchuan was ranked second. His note said: *Chief disciple of Cangya. Spiritual Cultivator. Late-stage Breakthrough level. Master of numerous Daoist arts and proficient in myriad schools.*

Next was Chu Huan of Lianjian Sect—Chen Yi's shixiong—ranked third. The remaining top ten were two competitors from Qinglu Sword Sect, two more from Cangya, and several Buddhist disciples. Duan Chongxuan, thanks to his final sword strike against Cheng Tianyu, had entered the top ten at eighth place. His accompanying text noted: *Considerably wealthy; endless supply of fire talismans.*

He Yanyun also made the top eighteen, one step closer to her glutinous rice chicken wrapped in lotus leaf.

It drew a few sighs that the once-glorious Baopu Sect only had three disciples in the ranked round, and all were near the bottom. Many lamented their poor luck. Had they not drawn Cangya opponents so early, the outcome might have been different.

Yin Biyue, personally, found the rankings skewed. "Why is Shixiong below me?"

He'd always had a feeling that Luo Mingchuan hid his real strength. At the very least, Yin Biyue knew he couldn't defeat him. Duan Chongxuan opened his mouth to explain, but Luo Mingchuan cut him off.

"It's just a nominal order. No need to dwell on it, Shidi."

Duan Chongxuan nearly groaned—Luo-shixiong was terrible at expressing himself! He couldn't even seize this chance to win Yin Biyue's favor. People who liked his fourth shixiong were only going to increase. What was Luo Mingchuan going to do when that happened?

Who was the one who'd told the Administration Hall of the Qinglu Sect: *"My cultivation level might be higher, but my combat power can't compare to Yin-shidi."*

Who was the one who'd stood in front of the Wall of Sunken Shadow and declared to the crowd: *"I'm one rank below Yin-shidi. If anyone wants to challenge him, defeat me first."*

He could say those things publicly, but he couldn't tell Yin Biyue the truth now?!

Clearly unwilling to let Duan Chongxuan point that out, Luo Mingchuan changed the subject. "I've actually received a challenge from Chu Huan."

Chu Huan of Lianjian Sect, the disciple of Second Sage Qu Jiang, was ranked third on the list. A spiritual cultivator who practiced the Rejuvenation of the Withered, he was hailed as the most likely spiritual cultivator in the younger generation to reach the Sage level. Yin Biyue had already defeated Zhong Shan, the Qinglu Sword Sect's strongest contender for first place. If Luo Mingchuan defeated Chu Huan of Lianjian Sect, their victory in the Flower-Plucking Tournament would be all but assured.

Chapter 48

YE CITY AND QINGLU SWORD SECT were both located in the Southern Continent, so it was natural that Zhong Shan's reputation was more prominent here. Chu Huan, as a disciple of the Lianjian Sect's Second Sage from the Central Continent, seemed to have his own brilliance overshadowed by the dazzling performances at the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Although he had displayed formidable strength in the previous rounds, it was still within expectations and lacked any outstanding displays. Some believed he hadn't encountered an opponent strong enough to reveal his ultimate move. Just like Chen Yi, who hadn't used his strongest attack before facing Yin Biyue, and was underestimated as a result.

Most female disciples of Lianjian Sect were bold and unrestrained, much like their sect leader Yang Liu. Many of the sect's male disciples, however, resembled their elder Qu Jiang. Among the six Second Sages, Qu Jiang was the most even-tempered and restrained. Only when he drew his sword did he truly resemble a Second Sage.

Duan Chongxuan sorted through his various information and came to a solid conclusion. "I suspect Chu Huan only used 40 percent of his strength in the last round."

Yin Biyue frowned. He had watched one of Chu Huan's matches. Chu Huan hadn't used Rejuvenation of the Withered, so he couldn't discern anything.

Luo Mingchuan smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. I've also practiced some wood-element techniques."

Shixiong! What haven't *you practiced?!*

Logically, Yin Biyue knew he was overthinking. Luo Mingchuan would surely win. Still, Yin Biyue couldn't help worrying, and it wasn't a normal kind of worry. In fact, this new emotion was so foreign that it made him wonder if something was wrong with him.

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THE MATCH WAS SCHEDULED for the hour of the rooster's crow. As the first match of the ranked challenges—Cangya's chief disciple versus the disciple of Lianjian Sect's Second Sage—it didn't matter how early the match started. Countless observers would rise as early as necessary to watch, especially the disciples of Lianjian and Cangya. Nearly every disciple from the two sects in Ye City had shown up.

The two fighters bowed to each other in the ring.

In terms of appearance, Chu Huan was far more recognizable than Chen Yi, yet their temperaments were practically the same. Dressed in the Lianjian Sect's purple robes, which were cinched at his narrow waist that was framed by his expansive sleeves, he exuded a gentle, harmonious air. Everyone present found the sight of such poised gentlemen sharing the stage a true delight.

"I have long admired you," said Chu Huan.

"You flatter me," came Luo Mingchuan's reply.

Without further exchange, the match began.

Chu Huan struck first. A streak of green light shot out of his sleeve. It howled as it instantly expanded into a thick rope that flew across the stage. Only when it reached Luo Mingchuan's face could the crowd see it was a vine, lush and vibrant, that sprouted fresh buds as it moved. Gripping the vine growing from his sleeve like a whip, Chu Huan lashed out.

Luo Mingchuan's expression remained unchanged. As Chu Huan's vine sprouted, a blazing wall of fire roared up in front of Luo Mingchuan to block it.

Duan Chongxuan felt a pang of embarrassment when he noted that Luo Mingchuan's hand seals were faster than his talisman throwing.

The flames only delayed the vine for a moment before its charred surface was replaced by a surge of verdant green, which pierced through the fire and continued its assault unabated. This time, a few spectators managed to catch Luo Mingchuan's hand seals, but before they could exclaim, the

fire wall transformed into a sea of flames. Urged on by the morning breeze, the fire grew fiercer, devouring sky and earth alike until it engulfed the entire platform. Those standing too close could feel the waves of scorching heat rolling toward them. Luo Mingchuan's figure was barely visible within the blaze.

Chu Huan's skin stung from the fierce heat despite the vital qi shielding his body. His purple robes took on patches of green that rapidly spread. Delicate vines were weaving over him to create an impenetrable armor while his attacking vine swept through the sea of fire like a wind whipping across waves, right toward Luo Mingchuan. Fights between spiritual cultivators were typically slow-paced, but these two defied convention, seemingly intent on deciding the match swiftly.

Even Duan Chongxuan was stunned. "Luo-shixiong's vital qi output…"

From north to south, the ring's diameter was over a hundred feet. How much vital qi did it take to conjure such an enormous fire, and that quickly?

Yin Biyue could sympathize with Duan Chongxuan's surprise but suspected it wasn't entirely warranted. "At the academy, I read about a technique similar to Bewildering Lunar Maze," he murmured. "It's likely that half the fire in the ring is an illusion."

Understanding dawned on Duan Chongxuan.

Yin Biyue wasn't the only one who'd drawn that conclusion. What the spectators didn't realize was that not just half, but over 80 percent of the flames were incredibly effective illusions. And illusory or not, the flames were enough to burn the vines relentlessly. Thick smoke rose and hung over the fire. Chu Huan retracted his vine, and some spectators wondered if he meant to concede.

Instead, Chu Huan walked to the center of the ring. Surrounded by flames, he began forming hand seals. They were peculiar dual-handed seals that no one recognized. The green vines covering him blackened and withered, their vitality draining away, leaving his purple robes exposed to the scorching flames. Despite the apparent danger, his movements were unhurried and his expression remained solemn.

As his gestures quickened, some sensed faint tremors beneath their feet.

“An earthquake?”

“I feel it too. What is that?”

The tremors were subtle, but cultivators’ heightened senses confirmed they weren’t imagined. Tension spread through the crowd as everyone focused.

At last, the earth rocked and a deafening rumble erupted. Countless fissures tore across the platform. Fresh sprouts burst from the cracks, growing wildly despite the fiery wind. Soon, they were nearly sixty feet in height. The crowd stared in disbelief as an elm forest sprang from the platform and overtook the inferno.

Duan Chongxuan gasped. “Wait, is this…*also* an illusion?”

“No.” Yin Biyue’s voice shook as he answered. Chu Huan truly had grown a forest on the platform. Yin Biyue also noticed that when the platform cracked, there was no flying debris, no dust—as if the ground had split apart without protest. This meant the attack had been approved by nature. Chu Huan’s Rejuvenation of the Withered had already glimpsed the true meaning of communing with the wild.

The elders on the eastern viewing deck turned to the array controller.

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder frowned. “No anomalies.”

The array’s stability deemed this attack’s power within acceptable limits. The spectators thrummed with astonishment.

“Did he just grow an entire forest in an instant?”

“That’s insane! If he’s already like this at the late Breakthrough level, how strong will he be in Great Ascension?!”

It was insane, indeed. The elms in the ring blotted out the sky, their intertwined branches isolating the platform from the outside world—and not just visually. The whole ring was now Chu Huan’s personal domain. Pale-faced but bright-eyed, he stood at the center. The dense foliage relayed to him his opponent’s position and movements, then launched endless attacks in return. In this forest, death and rebirth occurred almost

simultaneously. It was a cycle of withering and flourishing in seconds, life regenerating without end.

The crowd could no longer see the fighters or the flames. Even straining their senses, they only heard wind rustling the foliage as the leaves surged like tidal waves, one crest overtaking another, sweeping through heaven and earth.

Yin Biyue's suspicions were confirmed. "Blue Sea Tide."

This was a technique ranked among the top three in the Rejuvenation of the Withered Manual. No one below Small Ascension had ever mastered it because their innate spiritual meridians lacked purity. Their vital qi just couldn't sustain it. Yet at his current level, Chu Huan had not only communed with nature but borrowed power from heaven and earth.

It was terrifying. The Sage who'd created this manual during the Age of Sages, while he was still at the Great Ascension level, had once used it to exhaust a Second Sage to death. Even if Chu Huan's current mastery was but a fraction of its essence, it was enough to unsettle anyone.

The Lianjian Sect elder looked surprised. She thought she knew Chu Huan. Who could have guessed she'd still underestimated him.

Many wondered how Luo Mingchuan was evading the endless assaults within the forest, whether he was injured, or if his vital qi could still sustain the sea of fire.

From Chu Huan's perspective, his opponent was maintaining high-speed movement. Though he couldn't pinpoint Luo Mingchuan's location, the entire forest was his eyes and ears. No matter how fast Luo Mingchuan moved, he'd have to pause eventually amid the relentless assault. Besides, maintaining such speed was a massive drain of his vital qi.

Chu Huan sensed when his opponent was injured, sensed the sticky feeling of fresh blood dripping onto leaves. But in reality, Luo Mingchuan was standing calmly on a branch in the south side of the ring. The leaves beneath his feet lay quiet and gentle, brushing the hem of his robes as though fawning on him. Sometime during the match, his eyes had darkened to a color black as night.

He watched the forest grow, and even the expressions of the spectators below the ring. He could see the worry in his shidi's eyes. He

closed his own. Howling wind began to twist through the towering trees. As it picked up speed, it whipped his robes and sent fallen leaves into frenzied dances.

Chu Huan felt a pang in his heart, then lurched forward and coughed up a mouthful of blood. In that moment, his connection to the forest he'd grown had been forcibly severed. It felt as if a sword had slashed through his consciousness, leaving an indelible scar. Seconds later, every branch and vine turned against him, attacking viciously. Everything in sight was no longer his domain. Now, it was his worst enemy!

The crowd watched as the entire forest trembled in the wind, then rapidly withered and decayed, its ashes scattering like dust. The foliage died away to reveal a ghastly pale Chu Huan, whose lips were stained with blood. His long purple robes had been torn by his own branches.

"I admit defeat," he said in a hoarse voice.

The fissures sealed once more and vanished without a trace. One had to look closely to see even the faintest cracks left behind in the stage. The spectators were still stupefied, unable to comprehend what had just happened. In a flash, the match had been decided, leaving only a ring lined with indistinct but beautiful patterns.

Yin Biyue studied them, finding the pattern familiar, like the traces of an array he had seen before.

Qinglu Sword Sect's administrative disciple made the announcement. "Match ended. Luo Mingchuan of the Cangya Mountains wins!"

Luo Mingchuan cupped hands at Chu Huan in a salute. "Thank you for the match."

That was when someone in the audience noticed that he was standing exactly where he had been at the start of the match, like he'd never moved a step.

Yin Biyue watched as his Luo-shixiong navigated through the congratulatory crowd and, in between polite nods, made a beeline for him. He tried to suppress it but couldn't stop the corners of his lips from quirking up.

Luo Mingchuan matched him.

Chapter 49

LUO MINGCHUAN'S PERFORMANCE in this match had been more conspicuous than in previous rounds. Because he'd effortlessly defeated Chu Huan, he received no further challenge letters in the following days. Most of the spectating disciples admitted they couldn't last a cup of tea's time under Chu Huan's "Blue Sea Tide," so they had *no* desire to challenge Luo Mingchuan.

Many judged that his strength surpassed Yin Biyue's, and thus they waited for Luo Mingchuan to challenge him, since he currently held first place. It wasn't uncommon for fellow disciples to face each other in the Flower-Plucking Tournament, and the ranked matches were inherently individualistic.

However, as the tournament's end date approached day by day, and over a dozen challenge matches were fought, no action was taken by the Qiushui Lake duo. It was as if Luo Mingchuan had given up his right to challenge Yin Biyue. People couldn't help but speculate. Some claimed the two shared such deep camaraderie that they would never cross swords. This theory found little acceptance, as sparring with fellow disciples was common in cultivation. The tournament wasn't a life-or-death event, so why would it affect their bond?

Another explanation was more popular. Someone claimed the two had been seen walking arm in arm on the day of Major Heat in Alley Fourteen of the city's south district. Gossip sprang up and grew more exaggerated, until some were outright claiming that Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan were no ordinary shixiong and shidi, and that they planned to join in union in the future.

When Yin Biyue heard Duan Chongxuan recount this, he nearly dropped his sword. It took him some time to steady his breathing.

"This must never be mentioned in front of Shixiong!"

Despite Duan Chongxuan's repeated assurances that everything would be fine, Yin Biyue still felt uneasy.

Luo Mingchuan hasn't already heard, has he? He is a man of propriety and principle. When has he ever been subjected to such absurd talk?! He'll definitely be furious! Maybe…he'll distance himself from me to avoid suspicion?

No way! Yin Biyue, would you measure a protagonist's heart with the mind of a villain? Shixiong is open and upright. Why would he care about others' idle gossip?

But…he was still scared of his shixiong finding out. The mere thought of it was mortifying.

In the end, Yin Biyue decided to stay quiet but keep a close eye on Luo Mingchuan. As long as they avoided the city center and stayed away from crowded teahouses and taverns, his shixiong would never find out. The tournament ended in a few days anyway, and they would return to the Cangya Mountains the moment it did! It was a flawless plan!

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LUO MINGCHUAN NOTICED Yin Biyue had changed recently. Starting in the early morning, his shidi would lurk by his window, pacing back and forth in the yard, as though to ensure he was there. As soon as Luo Mingchuan showed any signs of going out, Yin Biyue would appear, even when he'd just been training by the lake.

"Shixiong, where are you going?"

"He-shimei has a challenge match today. I'm going to watch."

"I'll come too. Let's go together."

Not only that, but after every match they spectated, Yin Biyue would anxiously insist on detouring around the bustling city center. Luo Mingchuan didn't know what his shidi was thinking, but it made him happy. Even if the look in Yin Biyue's eyes remained as clear as lake water, devoid of any love, Luo Mingchuan was still thrilled to be around him.

The Cangya disciples didn’t feel the same.

Watching the two grow closer by the day, inseparable as body and shadow, the onlookers wished Yin Biyue could come of age overnight, so they could hold the crowning ceremony and the union ceremony back-to-back as soon as they returned to the sect.

“It’s too bad Yin-shixiong isn’t of age yet. Luo-shixiong still has years to wait.”

Almost everyone sighed this at least once. It was the consensus of the cultivation world that joining in union too early, which led to the premature release of vital essence, could easily destabilize one’s foundation. After all, a cultivator’s lifespan was long. One was not formally of age until twenty, when sect elders or elders of the family clan crowned them.

Little did Yin Biyue know that, while he was painstakingly shielding his shixiong from gossip, He Yanyun and the others had already decided on the color scheme for their future union ceremony’s decorations.

On the third-to-last day of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, Duan Chongxuan received a challenge from a Qinglu Sword Sect disciple. Even though he couldn’t unleash the Beacon Fire again, he still emerged victorious and maintained his rank. His cultivation had advanced by leaps and bounds through his recent diligence and the combat insights he’d gathered. His inner energy was surging near the point of a breakthrough.

On the final day, He Yanyun defeated a Xingshan Temple disciple who was ranked ninth, successfully advancing to the top ten and obtaining the right to pluck a leaf. Ruan Xiaolian wept tears of joy and treated her to ten pieces of cold rice cakes.

The Flower-Plucking Tournament concluded on the first day of autumn. A night rain swept through Ye City, and by morning, the wind had shifted. The breeze fluttering the tavern banners carried a refreshing coolness, and the puddles on the bluestone streets shimmered with a sense of chill, as if the bright sun had shed its intensity. The vexing and oppressive heat was gone. Late summer, early autumn, with its high skies and pale clouds, was the perfect time for mountain climbing.

That day, the match rings stood empty. A hundred feet from Mount Chongming’s base, disciples from various sects gathered in solemn silence.

Despite their numbers, not even a whisper passed through the crowd.

This spot was closer to the mountain than the rings, near enough to reveal a winding path veiled in mist. The Qinglu Sword Sect administrative disciple amplified his voice with vital qi and announced across the fields: “The champion is invited to ascend the mountain and pluck the flower.”

The crowd parted to clear a path for Yin Biyue. Under the gaze of thousands, he was suddenly a little nervous, and he glanced at the man beside him. Luo Mingchuan gave an almost imperceptible nod. The nod calmed Yin Biyue. He crossed through the sea of people, step by step, with unwavering focus.

At the stairs marking the mountain path’s entrance stood four esteemed elders: one from Qinglu Sword Sect, one from Jiekong Temple, one from Lianjian Sect, and one from Ye City. They were all halfway to Great Ascension. As the highest-ranking elders present at the tournament, they were here to “open the mountain path” for Yin Biyue.

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder addressed him with a solemn admonition. “The path of cultivation is long. Diligence must never slacken, not for a single day. Today, you ascend the mountain to pluck the flower. Tomorrow, you must strive for even greater heights!”

In truth, he believed that although Yin Biyue was still a junior, his temperament and endowment far surpassed the elder’s own when he’d been that age. If all went well, Yin Biyue was highly likely to enter the Sage level in three hundred years. He didn’t think he could teach the boy anything, but tradition demanded a few words of encouragement.

Yin Biyue bowed.

The elder produced a one-inch stone dagger from his sleeve. “This contains a wisp of my sword qi. Infuse it with vital qi to activate it.”

The Jiekong Temple monk and the Ye City elder each produced a string of prayer beads and a Mountain-Opening Talisman. They, too, were filled with emotion. Headmaster-xiansheng’s foresight was truly impeccable—the Age of Stars of the cultivation world had arrived. The future of the realm would soon rest in the hands of these young people.

The middle-aged elder of Lianjian Sect offered Yin Biyue a wooden hairpin. Unlike the previous three impressive offense items, this was a rare

defense item that automatically activated when the carrier was threatened. It could block a full-power strike from anyone below the Great Ascension level. In her eyes, Yin Biyue's extraordinary talent allowed him to fight above his level. But his personality was too naive to the world's ways. This made him vulnerable to schemes. She thought a defense item might be more practical to him. The mercy he'd shown to Chen Yi had left a favorable impression that stirred her protective instincts.

Gifts bestowed by elders could not be declined. Yin Biyue bowed in thanks to each and accepted them with both hands. The four elders nodded and stepped aside, granting him passage. Yin Biyue began his ascent. The stone steps, worn by time, wound upward into the misty unknown. He walked for a long time before a voice echoed faintly behind him.

"The mountain path is open. The nine other victors are invited to ascend and pluck their leaves."

The crowd at the foot of the mountain watched as the white-haired youth's figure shrank into the distance. He blended into the haze hanging in the air until he was nearly invisible.

The remaining nine contestants who'd ranked in the top ten began their ascents, each bowing to the four elders by the path. Some received advice or gifts, though these gifts were optional, bestowed at the elders' discretion as icing on the cake rather than a fixed rule.

The second climber, Luo Mingchuan, quickened his pace after paying respects to the elders. By the time the third contestant ascended, he had already vanished. The crowd below only saw a blur as he disappeared.

Yin Biyue reached the path's end. The lush forests flanking the trail had thinned, and the wind now carried a biting chill. Shrubs and moss grew sparse as he gained altitude, and the colder climate coated them in frost. Occasional pines dotted the cracks of the barren landscape. The terrain turned hazardous; jagged rocks replaced paved paths. Climbers who made it this far had to find their own way. Yin Biyue let his mind wander while he climbed. Could there really be a lake atop this steep mountain? Could lotus flowers really bloom in such a cold place?

A familiar voice called from behind him.

"Shidi."

Yin Biyue turned around to see Luo Mingchuan standing beneath a pine, as if he were back amid the misty peaks of the Cangya Mountains.

Yin Biyue smiled. No matter what lay ahead, someone would always walk with him.

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AT NIGHT, THE STREETS OF YE CITY were lined with light so abundant that lanterns replaced the moon. Yunyang City of the Central Continent was similar, with its undimmed splendor and its lanterns that shone eternal daylight.

Headmaster-xiansheng was stargazing. No matter how resplendent the city lights, they could not pull his eyes from the stars. To him, nothing in the world was more beautiful or meaningful than the starry night sky. It was a simple pleasure that he indulged on countless nights.

Except tonight. Tonight wasn't so pleasant.

Seated by the stone table in his courtyard, the night breeze ruffling his high hat and wide sleeves, he paled as he gazed at the night sky.

In the unreachable cosmos, two stars of equal brilliance drew nearer. One burned on the surface and spewed relentless black flames that concealed a tremendous, terrifying power. The other was encased in ice yet emitted an azure glow. Their radiance intertwined, forming a beautiful sight. But it shouldn't have been like this. By his calculations, at this proximity, they should have repelled each other. They *should* vie for dominance until one fell.

With a toss of his sleeve, a circular array disk appeared on the stone table. Made of aged sandalwood with a luster of jade, its surface was carved with crisscrossing lines that seemed chaotic. With a tap of his fingers, the lines began to interweave and flow rapidly. Although it had been years since he last needed the disk for calculations, his movements remained deft. As one who stood at the world's zenith, he understood the laws of the world better than most. The cosmos was one whole, and each star's trajectory was

interconnected. A tug on one would affect all, but their energies varied, and so did their degree of influence.

However, these two stars held unimaginable power. In other words, their changes could alter the entire world—the entire *universe*.

Headmaster-xiansheng's gaze was intensely focused as his hands moved faster and faster. Yet no calculation method he tried yielded answers. The lines on the disk shifted at blinding speed. To ordinary eyes, they would have been mere white smears.

The more he reckoned, the stronger his unease became. No, impossible. How could he have been wrong? Where had he erred?

His mental strength was depleting at a vicious rate as he processed variables to the power of one hundred septendecillion at an incalculable rate. Time passed by the second, by the minute, yet his calculations continued. This was an extremely dangerous state that bordered on obsession.

Gradually, he lost track of his purpose. The compulsion deepened. Cold sweat drenched his robes like rain, and his mind throbbed in agony. Yet he didn't know how to stop. He couldn't stop. He stared transfixed at the array disk, his eyes burning red.

Clack!

A dagger tore through the air and embedded itself in the array disk. Headmaster-xiansheng lurched and coughed out a mouthful of blood. He'd been jolted awake. Belatedly, terror flooded him—he'd entered a state of mental obstruction. He stared at the bloodied, shattered disk, still too stunned to process what had just happened.

He looked up. On the library eaves outside the courtyard wall, silhouetted against the night, stood a figure whose robes whipped in the wind. Even as a blurred shadow, he recognized that form. It reminded the headmaster that, while no leaf or petal in the academy escaped his notice, this man still came and went as he pleased.

Headmaster-xiansheng turned his gaze to the array disk. The "dagger" was no blade, but half a gray roof tile that had been casually flung. Nevertheless, it had pierced the Cosmic Calculation Disk, destroying one of the world's top ten spiritual items. The scholar rose to his feet and

wiped the blood from the corner of his lips. He flicked the hem of his sleeves, and all traces of disarray vanished. Gazing at the figure on the eaves, he smiled.

“Long time no see, Wei Jingfeng.”

Tonight, the academy was tranquil as ever. Students slept soundly in their dorms. The Hall of Night Study’s dim yellow lamps flickered. Meditators sat upon the chilly terrace. Stray cats curled in leaf piles in the small woods, softly purring. No one knew a great figure had arrived. But the heavens knew. The moon knew. And so the stars retreated, as boundless moonlight bathed Yunyang City.

Chapter 50

As dusk fell, people descended the mountain one after another, the hems of their robes dusted with frost, jade-green lotus leaves gripped in their hands. Their fellow disciples cheered loudly with each new arrival and crowded around them to escort them back.

He Yanyun came down a bit late. Amid the sunset glow, Ruan Xiaolian spotted her at once, not because her movements were particularly graceful, but because…her lotus leaf was simply too large. Everyone else carried leaves no bigger than plates or palm-leaf fans, while He Yanyun's was so enormous it blocked half her body. As she emerged from the mountain path, others turned to stare. Fortunately, her youth and charm made her display quite cute.

Ruan Xiaolian hurried forward. She looked the leaf up and down. "This…should definitely be enough for many servings."

He Yanyun preened. "But of course. I picked the biggest one."

"We can even invite Duiyan to join us," Ruan Xiaolian said with a cheerful laugh.

Those nearby were puzzled. They had no clue what the two girls were talking about.

The Thousand-Leaf Lotus only bloomed at midnight. Picking it too early or too late would cause its medical properties to dissipate. If Yin-shixiong was plucking the flower, Luo-shixiong would certainly accompany him—that was the consensus of the Cangya disciples. Rather than wait at the foot of the mountain for Luo Mingchuan, they chose instead to leave with wondrous hope and blessings for the couple in their hearts.

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THE MOONLIGHT WAS SO BRILLIANT it obscured the stars. Mount Chongming itself was shrouded in thick clouds, mist, and hazy darkness. The bustling sea of people gathered at its base had returned to their courtyards, leaving only peace and quiet.

The night wind was damp and chill. Yin Biyue gazed at the tens of thousands of lotus leaves, layered like azure waves that rippled in the breeze. He couldn't believe a lake actually existed atop this mountain. The verdant leaves, the dark water, the silvery moonlight, and the drifting fog wove together into an almost surreal dreamscape.

The fierce wind was bitterly cold. When he gazed up at the vast heavens, the moon hanging in the firmament seemed within arm's reach. Standing here, he should've felt the loneliness that plagued the peak. But because someone was beside him, even this frozen night was warm.

Yin Biyue was dazed for a moment. In his long life as a transmigrating villain, this warmth was something he'd never experienced before. Somehow, it'd grown on him before he'd noticed what was happening.

"Luo-shixiong…" he murmured softly, his voice scattering in the wind.

Luo Mingchuan didn't ask him what was wrong. "Yin-shidi." Moonlight swirled in his gaze as he focused on Yin Biyue.

Yin Biyue felt his heart flutter. Subconsciously, he twisted his head away to look at the lake and the lotus leaves instead. Shimmering motes of light were rising from the lake's center, darting like dancing fireflies or scattered stardust. They flickered in and out of existence, ephemeral and stunning.

Luo Mingchuan smiled. "The flower is about to bloom."

Yin Biyue blinked. Before he could react, Luo Mingchuan's hand gently grasped his wrist and pulled him forward. They walked on the lotus leaves, wind brushing their faces, sleeves fluttering.

At the heart of the lake stood a solitary lotus. Its stem was slender, the unopened bud delicate and small. Motes of light seeped from the gaps

between its petals. They flitted here and there as they rose. The moon, traveling west, hung directly above it.

The flower’s transition from a tightly closed bud to a dazzling full bloom took but an instant.

Radiance flowed from the stamen to paint the surrounding water a shimmering white. The jade-tinted lotus blossom was no larger than a palm. It unfolded layer upon layer for thousands of petals—an exquisite masterpiece of celestial craftsmanship.

“Shidi, eat it immediately after plucking. The effect will be strongest.”

Yin Biyue nodded. He reached out and snapped the stem. The radiance faded to nothing at once. When he placed the flower in his mouth, it dissolved into refreshing liquid before he could even chew, and flowed through his meridians like a burbling stream.

At the same time, Luo Mingchuan tapped his foot lightly and retreated at lightning speed with a single leap. His own inner energy surged uncontrollably. Wisps of cloud scattered, leaves parted, and water churned into waves where he passed. The heartblood oath had been released.

His cultivation grew so potently that it skipped over the early stage of Small Ascension and only slowed upon reaching mid-stage. He'd backed away in a hurry out of fear that the force of his advancement would affect Yin Biyue. Now, he watched his shidi nervously from afar.

Yin Biyue felt the lotus's essence nourish every fiber of his being, and his consciousness became clearer than ever. It was a strange but wondrous feeling. He closed his eyes.

Cultivators at the Breakthrough level and above could visualize the sea of vital qi within their bodies. Currently, his consciousness floated above that space, watching countless tributaries gather silvery light and flow into the expansive sea. He knew those streams had been manifested by the Thousand-Leaf Lotus. Like rivers returning to the ocean, as if a moon had spilled its brilliance across the waves, the qi churned and glimmered.

Luo Mingchuan saw Yin Biyue close his eyes, his body bathed in a soft glow that mirrored the moon above. The Thousand-Leaf Lotus was working, its effect no different from a second purification, elevating Yin Biyue's innate potential.

Luo Mingchuan beamed as bright as the moon, more elated than during his own breakthrough only moments ago. But then his smile froze.

Yin Biyue opened his eyes, his gaze cold and clear. A flash of silver crossed his eyes. His white robes fluttered in the wind and swirled beneath his luminous, silky white locks. Luo Mingchuan felt as if he'd plunged into ice, and a chill gripped his heart. The Thousand-Leaf Lotus hadn't cured his shidi's white hair affliction.

Yin Biyue opened his eyes to see Luo Mingchuan had advanced to mid-stage Small Ascension, his inner energy harmonious and his state stable. Just as Yin Biyue was about to congratulate Luo Mingchuan, he noticed his shixiong's unfocused expression.

"Shixiong?" A twist of white hair was draped over Yin Biyue's shoulder as he looked at Luo Mingchuan.

Luo Mingchuan couldn't help but focus on it. He then pulled Yin Biyue ashore with a grave expression. "Shidi, we'll leave for Xingshan Temple at once. If they can't help, we'll go to Jiekong Temple. There has to be a way! You'll get better, I promise!"

Yin Biyue followed Luo Mingchuan's gaze and figured out where the problem lay. "Shixiong, it's *fine*. I feel perfectly well."

But Luo Mingchuan was convinced Yin Biyue was just trying to console him. He couldn't accept that answer. He looked earnestly into his shidi's eyes.

"There'll be a way. Won't you come with me?"

***

HEADMASTER-XIANSHENG stood in his courtyard as the locust trees rustled in the evening breeze. He studied the figure on the eaves, distant as the moon yet familiar as a neighbor.

"Since you're here, why not come down for a cup of tea?" he asked.

A wide distance existed between them, and he'd spoken softly, but the man leaped down. His cloak puffed out behind him like a white bird spreading its wings and drew a bright arc through the black night, before he landed lightly in the courtyard three feet away from him. The perfect distance.

Headmaster-xiansheng knew Wei Jingfeng hadn't traveled thousands of miles from the Yunxing Abyss for tea, so he waited for him to speak first.

Wei Jingfeng glanced at the cracked array disk and roof tile on the stone table. He'd saved Headmaster-xiansheng, but he had also destroyed his spiritual device. That glance held multitudes. For Sages, killing or saving a life was but a whim.

Then he spoke, his tone somber. "This old fellow told you not to interfere."

Despite his tone and the way he referred to himself as "old fellow," his voice sounded rough and young, like a boy half grown. These two elements should have been incongruous, but because of his commanding presence, they didn't sound out of place in the slightest. Just as the mountains stood tall and the abyssal waters stood still, he was dignified and unfathomable.

Headmaster-xiansheng said nothing. Silence at a time like this was not tacit assent or agreement—it was defiance. Wei Jingfeng immediately understood. His voice turned cold.

“People praise you as ‘Heaven’s Reckoning,’ and you actually believe it. Who do you think you are? Scholars are the most useless of all!”

His words were full of loathing.

“Scholars are the most useless of all!”

Headmaster-xiansheng was indeed a scholar, but he was the highest-ranked one in the world. Who’d dare call him useless? He hadn’t heard such rudeness in six hundred years. Regardless, he wasn’t vexed by this. In fact, he was a little amused.

You see? This is what happens if you don’t study. When it comes to insults, that’s the only one you know.

He chuckled and finally spoke. “Wei Jingfeng, after all these years, your looks haven’t changed at all.”

At this remark, the Sword Sage’s tone sharpened. Wind howled through the locust trees, making them shiver. “Beauty fades, bones decay. Mere appearances! As if an old man like me cares about such trifles!”

He took two steps forward and left the shadows of the corridor. The moon cast its glow upon his face and illuminated what was surely the face of a young man. In his snow-white cloak and embroidered boots, he resembled a gallivanting young noble.

The headmaster took two steps back, restoring their three-feet distance. He knew he’d made Wei Jingfeng angry, so the best thing to do was change the subject right away.

“How was the Yunxing Abyss?”

“Still expanding,” Wei Jingfeng replied. “What does the guy in Jiekong Temple say?”

“The same as me.”

The exchange sounded random, and their tone was light, yet it held within it the fate and future of the entire world.

The “guy in Jiekong Temple” referred to the Second Sage Wuwang, who’d withdrawn from worldly affairs a millennium ago. On this matter, however, he shared the same view as Headmaster-xiansheng, so the headmaster tried to talk sense into Wei Jingfeng.

“Why must you be so stubborn?”

The Sword Sage looked up, and his gaze pierced beyond the cosmos. “No one can decide another’s fate. Not sages, not the stars, and certainly not Heaven’s Will!”

It was a statement befitting Wei Jingfeng’s usual attitude. Headmaster-xiansheng could understand that, but he couldn’t accept it. He believed himself right. Not just Wuwang, but any ordinary person in this world would make the same decision if they knew.

And so he asked the Sword Sage: “Even if he would bring calamity to the world?”

Chapter 51

YIN BIYUE KNEW THAT in another story, his current hair color might mark him as a rebellious, nonconformist teenager going through a chuuni phase, or perhaps a sick AF[3] trendsetting fashion icon. But for the cultivators of this world, any physical anomaly was a concerning matter, especially one with no discernible cause. They didn't know if it was a symptom of latent issues with his cultivation. If it could be treated, it should be.

He hadn't cared at first, but his elder shixiong and second shijie had taken it very seriously. Otherwise, they wouldn't have thought of having him participate in the Flower-Plucking Tournament as a remedy.

He didn't want Luo-shixiong to worry, and intended to say: *There's no need to treat it. It's really fine.*

But perhaps the moonlight tonight was too beautiful, or the mountain lake too enchanting, or Luo Mingchuan's gaze too impossible to refuse—when Yin Biyue opened his mouth, what came out instead was "All right."

Luo Mingchuan smiled in relief. His shidi chose to trust him, just as he'd done at Xihua Peak when they agreed to travel together. Nothing could have made him happier.

Yin Biyue had realized that a refusal would have worried Luo Mingchuan more than anything else. So, to Xingshan Temple.

The world is vast. Let's go see it together.

***

UNDER THE SAME MOON, thousands of miles away in Yunyang City, another conversation was taking place. Here, the moon was not tender; it was cold and cruel. The two speakers held not a shred of concern for each

other. Nevertheless, similar to the exchange by the lake, the decision made here would directly—or indirectly—decide the fate of the world.

Their conversation did not result in a consensus. Faced with Headmaster-xiansheng's question, the Sword Sage watched the night sky.

"The future of this world will ultimately rest in the hands of the young," he said at last.

It sounded like a nonanswer, but Headmaster-xiansheng understood. He dropped the subject and took a few steps closer. Three feet could be a distance of courtesy or one of vigilance between enemies. Though he'd breached that invisible barrier, the mood between them strangely softened.

Headmaster-xiansheng walked to the stone table, put away the broken array disk, and replaced it with a well-worn tea set. He gestured for his guest to sit. Wei Jingfeng took his seat without ceremony. They drank tea, Premium Junshan Mist tea, just as they had many years ago, when they were still young.

"Set aside everything else for now. Stay and recover from your injuries first."

The Sword Sage's presence was imposing as always, betraying no sign of weakness, but he didn't deny Headmaster-xiansheng's words. "I'm an old man. What do I have to fear?"

"It's troublesome, that's all." The headmaster smiled.

Indeed, the Sword Sage feared nothing. Even when injured, slaying the man atop the Hengduan Mountains would take him no more than a single strike. But if word got out about his injury, countless fools would scheme—they'd overestimate their strength and throw themselves at him like moths to the flame. The world would fall into chaos, and the Sword Sage would draw his blade to kill again. Wei Jingfeng didn't fear killing, nor did he care about his reputation. He killed without regard for righteousness and acted solely according to his own principles. Still, he hated trouble. And the current situation *was* a troublesome one.

The Yunxing Abyss was still expanding, its demonic denizens too innumerable to exterminate. They sensed that one particular soul still lived, so they converged and clawed from the fiendish shadows, growing ever stronger over eons. If the source could not be slain, these demonic beings

would emerge from the sunless abyss sooner or later and devour every living thing. Demonic beings weren't like demonic cultivators; they felt no pain and required no cultivation. They grew stronger solely through consumption.

Wei Jingfeng was the first Sage in the Age of Spiritual Decline, and he remained the only one in the world. The Yunxing Abyss, a forbidden zone for cultivators, was a place only he could enter, so he had—and not just once. During his first venture there, five hundred years ago, Headmaster-xiansheng had started his reckonings and foreseen a cataclysmic calamity.

The Sword Sage's long absence from Cangya and Headmaster-xiansheng's years of tireless efforts had achieved a great deal. However, neither considered their deeds particularly noble or worthy of reverence. When the sky was falling, someone tall had to hold it up. They believed themselves taller than most, so it was within their duties. They had their disagreements, but neither was wrong. Their methods were just different. In the end, their paths had diverged irrevocably.

***

AS YIN BIYUE AND LUO MINGCHUAN descended the mountain, the dawn wind caressed the waning moon, and the new sun dyed the eastern ocean of clouds with a golden-red sheen. The morning air brushed their faces, carrying a dewy freshness and misty coolness that invigorated their spirits.

When they returned, Ye City was still deep in slumber. Tavern banners fluttered on the empty streets, and the air was filled with birdsong and rooster crows. On the roadside, shop clerks yawned as they unshuttered their stores. An elderly couple pushed their wooden cart and set up a breakfast stall. Steam drifted from their bamboo steamers.

Walking through the city, neither of them spoke. It reminded Yin Biyue of those afternoons and evenings after matches, when they'd walked

back to Qiushui Lake together. For some reason, it filled him with contentment. It felt like going home.

But when they reached the place where they were staying, something felt off. Duan Chongxuan wasn't by the lake or in the courtyard. Where could he have gone at this early hour? None of the teahouses were open yet. Yin Biyue frowned.

"Don't worry. He should be fine," Luo Mingchuan said.

They were about to search when a boy in ink-splashed robes ran over. His slightly oversized robes emphasized his smaller frame. It was Cheng Tianyu.

Seeing their expressions, Cheng Tianyu hurried to get his words out. "Don't worry! Duan-shixiong is in seclusion at Wutong Garden, overcoming his bottleneck… My shixiong said you two were due back by now and sent me here to inform you."

Yin Biyue relaxed. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you for your trouble," Luo Mingchuan said sincerely.

Cheng Tianyu blushed. "No need for thanks. Shixiong invites you both to come."

Duan Chongxuan had originally intended to suppress his breakthrough until they were back at Xihua Peak, but after he ascended the mountain, his mental state had settled. On the cusp of advancement, his inner energy had turned unstable, and his aura had started leaking out. Qinglu Sword Sect had two disciples who'd climbed the mountain to pluck leaves, and Song Tang and the other two had just happened to be waiting at the mountain's base. Upon seeing Duan Chongxuan descend, they'd invited him to go into seclusion at Wutong Garden.

Seclusion was a major matter. Duan Chongxuan wasn't one to trust easily, but he chose to trust them. Qinglu Sword Sect was the host for the Flower-Plucking Tournament this year, and they had the most powerful senior fighters stationed in Ye City. Wutong Garden, where the trio resided, was undoubtedly the safest place in the city, especially when no one knew if Zheng Wei of Baopu Sect was still around.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan followed Cheng Tianyu to Wutong Garden in the city's north district and thanked Song Tang and Zhong Shan. Song Tang was amazed that Luo Mingchuan had advanced to mid-stage Small Ascension level overnight. He congratulated him but didn't pry further.

As they chatted in the yard, Yin Biyue gazed at the door of the restricted room. He could vaguely sense the inner energy of Duan Chongxuan rising. The surrounding spiritual energy gathered toward the room.

What a relief, he thought. *With three Small Ascensioners here, they can fight Zheng Wei no problem if he shows up. Chatterbox couldn't be safer.*

Duan Chongxuan's breakthrough would take at least four days. Although the tournament was over, Qinglu Sword Sect still had wrap-up work to do. They wouldn't be leaving any time soon. Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue decided not to leave with the Cangya group in two days. They would wait for Duan Chongxuan to emerge and return together.

When they'd first departed the Cangya Mountains, only Luo Mingchuan had been at the Breakthrough level. Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan had been at the Spirit Concentration level. Soon, two of them would be at Breakthrough and one at Small Ascension. Cultivation advancement at this speed could only be described as meteoric.

No wonder so many cultivators prefer traveling for worldly experiences, Yin Biyue mused. *But what about Shifu? He's roamed for so many years. Is there anywhere in the world he* hasn't *been?*

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WITH THE CONCLUSION of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, smaller sects were leaving Ye City one after another. Likewise, the Cangya disciples also prepared to depart.

For cultivators, there wasn’t much to pack. The main thing was farewells. The Flower-Plucking Tournament wasn’t just about competition; it had forged bonds across sects. Parting now, with their future cultivation paths unknown, who knew if they would meet again?

Having been treated to lotus-wrapped glutinous rice chicken the other day, Qu Duiyan had planned to treat He Yanyun and Ruan Xiaolian to a feast at Taihe Pavilion that evening. But the duo shot her down.

“The night market’s better!”

Thus, the three girls sat at a bustling roadside wonton stall, each hugging well-worn porcelain bowls and scooping wontons into their mouths. Unfortunately, Qu Duiyan’s beauty made even street food look elegant. The lad at the table beside them spilled soup all over himself while staring at her.

The three ate their way through the market, until they finally ended the night by lounging on the rooftop of the Qiushui Lake courtyard to moongaze and enjoy the breeze.

“I think our top priority right now is getting you married off,” He Yanyun declared.

Qu Duiyan bristled. “Why me? I’m only in my sweet sixteenth. Not even my mother is rushing me!”

He Yanyun rubbed her belly. “Think about it. If you had a partner, we’d have four for mahjong. With just us three, all we can do is eat…”

Ruan Xiaolian burst out laughing. Not even the deepest sadness of parting could withstand He Yanyun’s cheer.

But all banquets must end.

As the moon climbed, its silver light spilled over the rooftop. Qu Duiyan stood, her sleeves waving in the wind, her face haloed in moonlight like a fairy descending from the moon palace.

“Remember to write, okay? Jade slips work too. Anything sent to Lianjian Sect will reach me.” Her eyes were elegantly misty.

“We will.” Ruan Xiaolian’s eyes reddened.

He Yanyun stood and looked away. “Who’s got that kind of free time?” she complained, though her eyes prickled.

***

AT DAYBREAK THE NEXT DAY, the Lianjian Sect group departed for the Central Continent. By noon, the Cangya disciples bade farewell to Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue, and left Ye City. Come dusk, most major sects had gone on their way home, except Baopu Sect and Qinglu Sword Sect.

With fewer visiting cultivators, Ye City returned to the state from when Yin Biyue and his two companions had first arrived. During the tournament, the city’s security was heightened, the black-armored guards patrolling and running about everywhere tirelessly. Now, they could relax again.

That day, Duan Chongxuan emerged from his seclusion.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan went to Wutong Garden first thing in the morning and waited outside the restricted room, watching the door with the other three. When the inner energy inside the room stabilized at last, Duan Chongxuan stepped out, radiant with newfound vigor. He bowed to the five, and thanked them for guarding his seclusion.

When the group saw his advancement was successful, they grinned. Cheng Tianyu congratulated him, and even the stoic Zhong Shan softened with relief. Duan Chongxuan noticed Luo Mingchuan’s advancement too. Wutong Garden bloomed with joy like spring flowers. Unbeknownst to them, the rest of Ye City was shrouded in gloom. A storm of dread and panic was brewing.

Someone in the city had died the night before.

It was the night watchman from South Street’s Shiyang Alley. There was no body. The only evidence was the bloodstains left in the cracks of the bluestone tiles and a demonic aura that split the tiles. If this had happened in the Eastern Continent where demonic cultivators ran rampant, it would

have been normal. But here, where the assailant had evaded the senses of senior fighters, and even Lord Ye, it was *terrifying*.

The Southern Continent hadn’t seen so much as a trace of demonic cultivators in nearly a hundred years.

Chapter 52

As the junior sect leader of Qinglu Sword Sect, Song Tang soon received word regarding the demonic cultivator incident.

“The defenses in Ye City are tight. Most buildings have protection arrays that can sense demonic energy, all directly linked to the City Master’s Mansion. During the Flower-Plucking Festival, the accommodations for disciples of various sects were not included in these arrays. The City Master’s men suspect that demonic cultivators may have hidden in these areas.”

After talking with the elder cultivator of Ye City, Song Tang ordered the sect’s disciples to cooperate with the black-armored guards’ investigation. He also relayed information about the situation to Luo Mingchuan, Yin Biyue, and Duan Chongxuan.

“As the host sect, it is our duty to handle such matters in the city,” Song Tang said.

“If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know,” Luo Mingchuan said with a frown. The reappearance of demonic cultivators was a huge problem for not just Ye City but the entire Southern Continent.

Song Tang was solemn. “My thanks.”

As the chief disciple of Cangya and now a mid-stage Small Ascensioner, Luo Mingchuan’s status and cultivation level commanded respect. If he joined the city’s investigation team, it would stabilize the situation and provide an extra layer of security for the citizens. Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan also wanted to help, but they felt their cultivation wasn’t high enough and decided not to add to the trouble. Instead, they led the black-armored guards to Qiushui Lake to voluntarily undergo a search.

The squad leader tested around the complex for demonic energy with a talisman, then thanked them politely before leaving. Cultivators at the Breakthrough level had sharper senses, so the duo could overhear the guards’ hushed conversation by the lake as they left.

“I didn’t expect it to go this smoothly.”

“Yeah. They’re all major sects, but the difference in manners is huge!”

Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan were puzzled by what they heard. For some reason, their sect had…earned praise?

***

THEY DIDN’T KNOW that the guards had first inspected the courtyard complex by Xinshui Bridge. As soon as the guards stated their purpose, the disciple who’d opened the door grew agitated.

“Our sect is a prestigious major sect. How dare you suspect us of harboring demonic cultivators!”

The squad leader was baffled. “We’re not.”

The Baopu Sect disciple would not relent. “Then why search us? Clearly you suspect us! This is bullying!”

“But…we’re searching literally everywhere,” the squad leader struggled to explain.

“Lies! What’s your real motive?”

The squad leader was speechless. Communication seemed impossible with this bunch. In the end, a Ye City elder had to intervene to resolve the conflict.

***

YIN BIYUE AND DUAN CHONGXUAN headed to the city center to see if they could find any clues. Compared to the usual bustling crowds, the streets were now much emptier. Nevertheless, there was no widespread panic yet, and shops and taverns on the main avenue remained open for

business. The black-armored guards patrolled the streets and alleys in strict formation, their gazes sharp as blades.

After walking around the streets, the chatterbox took his shixiong to a teahouse. Today, Taihe Pavilion had just a handful of customers. Without its typical rowdy full house, the place appeared tranquil and elegant.

The window seats offered a broad view of the entire street. Duan Chongxuan ordered a pot of Biluochun tea, along with a plate of lotus cakes and hibiscus pastries. Having been in seclusion for days, he felt like it'd been ages since he'd last chatted with someone. He desperately needed to talk.

He took a sip of tea and sighed. "Sishixiong, who would've thought demonic cultivators would come to the Southern Continent?"

"Demonic cultivation has been in decline for a long time. If this is a sign of revival, chaos is imminent." Yin Biyue frowned thoughtfully. "Although the Eastern Continent is separated from the others by sea, crossing it isn't difficult."

He still remembered how his second shijie had participated in the vanquishing of evil at Xiling Mountain. The battle had been brutal.

"It's strange that demonic cultivators have the leisure to come to the Southern Continent," Duan Chongxuan said. "The Twelve Palaces of the Demonic Dominion used to fight among themselves all day long in the Eastern Continent. How do they have the time to stir up trouble elsewhere?"

Yin Biyue knew Duan Chongxuan had many sources of insider information. "Do they have that many differences when they're all demonic cultivators?"

"Oh, plenty! During the Great Dao-Demon War, the Demon Lord was slain by the Linyuan sword. Then came the Heavenly Tribulation that wrought chaos, and the Age of Spiritual Decline descended." Duan Chongxuan's arms moved dramatically as he told the story. "The Demon Lord's twelve guardians refused to submit to each other and established their own factions, splitting into the Twelve Palaces. Each believed themselves the orthodox path, the rightful heir to the Demon Lord's mantle. With all the infighting in the Eastern Continent, no one group had a chance to gain momentum."

He ate a lotus cake and shifted the subject. “Hilariously, they all believe in one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That the Demon Lord isn’t dead! Now *that’s* the power of faith. The Demon Lord lived over a million years ago. Forget cultivators. Not even mythical beasts live that long.”

“The Demon Lord isn’t dead” was a popular joke among the common people. But Yin Biyue suddenly felt a chill. The strongest person in the world today was the Sword Sage, at the Sage level. There were no “True Immortals” like in the Age of Sages. If the Demon Lord truly wasn’t dead, who could stand against him? When Headmaster-xiansheng called this era the Age of Stars, did that include the demonic cultivators of the Eastern Continent?

Seeing Duan Chongxuan’s relaxed expression, Yin Biyue wondered if he was overthinking it. Duan Chongxuan glanced at the street outside and fell silent. As if he’d seen something amusing, his lips curled in a mocking smile.

Yin Biyue followed his gaze and saw a group of people below. The leader, someone at the Spirit Concentration level, wore a cyan Daoist robe with the Eight Trigrams pattern. Behind him were five or six at the Breakthrough level, and even a Small Ascensioner bodyguard. The group strutted down the center of the street, their oppressive auras unrestrained. Ordinary citizens scattered to avoid them. With the city guards busy hunting demonic cultivators and the group not actually causing disturbances or violating city laws, no one intervened for the time being.

Duan Chongxuan sniffed in derision. “My my, look at that swagger. Tsk. Truly worthy of the title ‘Little Bully of the Hengduan Mountains.’”

Only then did Yin Biyue recognize the leader. It was Li Lin of Baopu Sect, who had been thrown out of the ring during the Flower-Plucking Tournament by the chatterbox’s barrage of fire talismans. Apparently, his background was impressive—he was the only son of Elder Li Changhong, a Great Ascensioner. No wonder he had so many powerful bodyguards. Yin Biyue couldn’t stand the sight of him, but there was no real grudge between them. Since they were in Ye City, Yin Biyue had planned to simply ignore him.

However, Duan Chongxuan’s stare was blatant, and the Small Ascension guard noticed. Li Lin followed his gaze and saw the two by the window. His expression darkened.

The group turned and stormed up the teahouse stairs behind Li Lin.

The other patrons, sensing trouble and wary because of the demonic cultivator scare, had no interest in spectating. They hastily paid and left without hesitation. Soon, the entire second floor had emptied.

By the time Li Lin and his guards approached, Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan were already on their feet. They stopped at three feet apart. Neither side offered greetings.

Yin Biyue took two steps forward, positioning himself in front of Duan Chongxuan. This was instinctive. He was the shixiong, and Duan Chongxuan was his shidi. No matter how many opponents there were, whether they were at the Small Ascension or Great Ascension levels—even if a Second Sage had come—he would shield his companion. But the other party clearly wasn’t here for him.

Li Lin scoffed. “What’s this? Weren’t you so impressive in the ring? Now you have the nerve to hide behind someone else. Where are your fire talismans? All used up?”

Yin Biyue got it; Li Lin had come for a second round of humiliation. His bodyguards must have arrived in Ye City later, perhaps summoned by Li Lin himself. But since the chatterbox had devoted himself to cultivation, he’d rarely visited teahouses or gambling dens, so they hadn’t crossed paths again. Until now.

Duan Chongxuan stepped forward, his expression calm and unruffled. He didn’t argue back. “What do you want?”

He wasn’t suppressing any anger—he genuinely didn’t care. He had already reached the Breakthrough level while Li Lin remained stagnant at the Spirit Concentration level without any improvement. There was no point in arguing with someone beneath him. A lion wouldn’t turn around for a barking dog.

Li Lin was taken aback by his lack of reaction.

Just then, footsteps pounded up the stairs. A squad of black-armored guards arrived. The leader cupped his hands to salute both parties. “Sirs, I must inform you that fighting isn’t allowed here.”

Apparently, the teahouse owner had alerted the city guards when he’d seen the situation sour.

Li Lin suddenly grinned at Duan Chongxuan. “Yeah, haven’t you heard? City law prohibits fighting within the city. You can’t hit me here, or you’ll make an enemy of the City Administration.” His grin widened provocatively. “So fuck you, asshole!”

Duan Chongxuan still didn’t react. In fact, he had the leisure to feel glad that the Baopu Sect disciples had finally read the city laws. That meant they *could* read.

The squad leader was stunned. After some thought, he realized the city laws didn’t forbid visiting cultivators from hurling insults. This was troublesome. One side was obviously trying to *start* a fight, but there was nothing the guard could do until one actually broke out.

Li Lin’s voice raised as his curses grew increasingly vulgar. He spewed filth that insulted Duan Chongxuan’s entire family. Yin Biyue gripped the hilt of his sword, his expression stormy. He saw glee in Li Lin’s eyes.

But Duan Chongxuan calmly pulled Yin Biyue back to their seats to continue drinking tea.

Then, he heard the chatterbox via a silent sound transmission: *‹He’s trying to provoke us into attacking first. If we strike first, his Small Ascensioner bodyguard will immediately retaliate. According to city law, he’d be acting in self-defense. The guards might even have to help them… This is a loophole in the law. If you’re shameless enough, you can exploit it.›*

Yin Biyue glanced at the Small Ascensioner. Sure enough, his inner energy was pumped and ready for action. Yin Biyue knew he could fight back anyway; it was just that he found this whole face-slapping farce shockingly stupid. Then again, such stupidity might have been backed by someone testing whether the Sword Sage was still alive, and whether he would intervene in his disciples’ affairs. Li Lin was just cannon fodder.

‹We won’t take the bait. Let him yell!› Duan Chongxuan chuckled and sipped his tea, looking utterly unperturbed.

Meanwhile, Li Lin’s face flushed with rage. He took a deep breath and continued cursing.

Halfway through their pot of tea, even the black-armored guards couldn’t bear to listen anymore. “Damn, this guy’s mouth is foul…” one grumbled.

“These Cangya folks have the patience of saints. I’d have lost my temper a long time ago…”

Just when everyone assumed Li Lin would eventually tire himself out and leave, Duan Chongxuan stood up, because the last insult had been—

“Fuck your dad!”

“Do you even know who my dad is?” Duan Chongxuan asked seriously.

Chapter 53

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Duan Chongxuan looked menacing, and the oppressive aura of his Breakthrough level erupted.

Li Lin backed away and positioned himself behind his guards, but his stubborn nature wouldn't let him back down. "I don't care! Do you really think he can compare with mine? My dad is Li Changhong of Baopu Sect! Forget Ye City, anywhere you go, I'm untouchable!"

Thinking he'd finally riled Duan Chongxuan up, he started hurling even more filth.

Instead of responding, Duan Chongxuan gazed at the sky through the open window. Yin Biyue was already on his feet. If the chatterbox did act, he would deal with the Small Ascensioner first. Several city guards positioned themselves behind Li Lin's group, ready to restrain the bodyguards if necessary. The squad leader saw them taking sides and shot them a glare but didn't stop them. He tacitly allowed it.

The tension in the room thickened.

Li Lin seemed to sense a change in the air and his voice grew smaller.

Truthfully, Duan Chongxuan wasn't angry. He just missed his father a little. He'd missed him ever since he'd unleashed the Beacon Fire, and had continued thinking about him during his breakthrough in seclusion.

For a man in his twenties who had lived away from home for so long…missing his father now was downright embarrassing. While in that mood, he'd never expected to encounter the stupidest question in the world: *"Do you really think he can compare with mine?"*

"You're mistaken," Duan Chongxuan finally replied. "You think you're untouchable? My dad could slap yours and nobody would stop him."

Li Lin spat. "Bullshit!"

Now came an even stupider question: *How do I prove that my dad is my dad?*

Duan Chongxuan thought for a moment, then pulled out a half-inch-long silver whistle from his sleeve. Everyone, including Yin Biyue, was baffled. What was the point of bringing out a perfectly ordinary whistle right now?

Li Lin shut up and nervously watched Duan Chongxuan's movements.

Duan Chongxuan pressed the whistle to his lips and blew. The sound was clear and prolonged, carrying far into the distance before it dissipated in the wind. He gazed solemnly at the sky. Nothing happened.

Li Lin burst out laughing. "Ha ha! Look at that piece of junk—"

Duan Chongxuan also wondered if the thing was too old and broken for a moment. Besides, the distance was so great. It wasn't surprising nothing heard the whistle.

He cleared his throat, about to say something else when the squad leader glanced out the window.

"Is it…getting windy?"

The wind *had* picked up without warning. Screams and the sounds of objects toppling over rang from the streets. Thick elm trees bent at alarming angles, clouds of dust flew everywhere, and pedestrians rushed blindly into shops for cover. A fierce gale blasted into the teahouse, rattling the windows. The tea set on Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan's table was swept to the ground and shattered with a ringing crash as shards of porcelain scattered across the floor. The entire city trembled under the roaring wind.

Li Lin stared out the window, dumbstruck.

The squad leader was the first to react. He sprinted downstairs, shouting orders all the while. "Class-A emergency alert! Notify everyone to take shelter if they are able. Fourth Squad, follow me to open the underground passages—"

The main avenue cleared in an instant. Some ran home, while others hid in shops. Doors slammed shut, and windows rattled in their frames, nearly torn away by the wild winds.

Suddenly, the sky turned overcast, as if a massive shadow had blanketed Ye City. Beyond the shadow, the clouds churned with apocalyptic

force.

Inside the City Master's Mansion, Ye Zhiqiu shot to his feet nervously. But after a glance at the sky, he sat back down and muttered to himself in annoyance. "Duan Sheng'an, eh? Coming without even sending a letter first…"

The darkness deepened. Just when everyone thought the looming shadow would physically crush Ye City, the massive dark cloud began to shrink. Then it descended, bit by bit. Some thought it was something bluish in color, but it was so enormous it blotted out the sun, so it was hard to say.

The wind stopped. The shadow in the sky shrank another tenfold, landing on the now empty street like a small mountain crashing down into a valley.

Boom!

Dust erupted and deep cracks split the bluestone tiles. The Ye City elder who had rushed to the scene was pushed back over a dozen feet before he managed to stop himself. Inside the teahouse, Li Lin and his group were too stunned to speak.

What could it have been? And it had such an aura… That *thing* was Great Ascension level?!

When the dust settled, the citizens peeking out from shop windows saw only two massive bird talons digging deep into the ground like iron grappling hooks. Further up were legs as thick as tree trunks. Behind them was a long train of cyan tail feathers that stretched across the entire street as far as they could see. It was, without a doubt, a cyan-winged bird, but how could there be one *this* big?

It tilted its head, its crimson eyes locked onto the teahouse. It eyed the people on the second floor with cold indifference, the way humans regard ants. Li Lin, whose cultivation was the lowest, collapsed to his knees, shaken to the core by that brief regard. No one helped him up. His guards were too busy fearing for their own lives.

The window was so small they could only see the upper half of its body. But under the weight of its stare, no one dared move. Cold sweat drenched nearly everyone's clothes. Some understood the significance of what they saw but struggled to believe it all the same.

In the terrified silence, a voice broke through. “Don’t I always say to land softly…”

It was Duan Chongxuan.

Everyone thought he had lost his mind. Yin Biyue knew no sword would help now, but he was still prepared to step in front of his companion. He had seen illustrations of this creature before. This was a cyan-winged luan. Only the Northern Continent’s emperor kept them, and each one was at the Great Ascension level. Their wings conjured wind, and their breath spewed fire; in mere moments, one could travel tens of thousands of miles.

But why was one *here*?

The crimson eyes shifted and landed on Duan Chongxuan. Yin Biyue tensed—until he noticed the look in its eyes changed. It seemed almost… hurt.

The massive head nuzzled against the teahouse roof, sending dust and debris falling down. The building shook as if in an earthquake.

Duan Chongxuan shouted and braced himself. “You’re too big to fit! Make yourself smaller!”

The colossal, street-sized creature actually shrank to the size of a crane and flew in through the window, where it landed before Duan Chongxuan. When he raised his hand, it lowered its head and rubbed its crest feathers against his palm.

“It’s all right. I know you didn’t mean to.”

The cyan-winged luan cooed in response.

Duan Chongxuan turned to Yin Biyue with an excited smile. “Sishixiong! This is Luan Two!”

Yin Biyue’s mind exploded. The entire world cracked.

Li Lin was still on his knees. Duan Chongxuan stood over him smugly. “Not only could I slap you, my bird could slap you too.”

Li Lin didn’t respond. He had fainted.

The silence in the teahouse turned to panic. The crowd suddenly knew for sure *who* was standing in front of them. In the entire world, only

the emperor of the Northern Continent kept cyan-winged luan birds, and the emperor had only one son. Not even a fool would dare impersonate him.

The Small Ascensioner bodyguard dropped to his knees, prostrating himself before Duan Chongxuan. His hands shook uncontrollably. He was desperate to atone for his earlier offense. “Your Highness—”

Duan Chongxuan waved him off. “Just go.”

The bodyguards scrambled to carry Li Lin away and fled downstairs in disarray.

Yin Biyue returned to his senses and realized with amazement that many of his past complaints about Duan Chongxuan’s behavior…were true.

Has he never ridden a carriage in his life? He just flies everywhere?

Yep.

If this guy were born in the imperial capital of the Northern Continent, he would fake imperial decrees!

No need to fake them. In a few years, his words *would* be imperial decrees.

#my-chatterbox-shidi-is-the-future-hisimperialmajesty-the-emperor?!

□

Lol. Uh, truth is stranger than fiction, etc.?

After several rounds of spamming his mental bullet screen with commentary, Yin Biyue found his voice again. “Do…Shixiong and Shijie know about this?”

Duan Chongxuan blinked. “About what? Luan Two?”

Yin Biyue paused. “Your *identity*.”

The chatterbox thought for a moment. “Dashixiong definitely knows. He was the one who opened the letter. Shijie…probably does too. Sanshixiong, I’m not sure. Maybe not.”

Well, that was slightly comforting. At least he hadn’t been the only one kept in the dark. He could still scare third shixiong with this later in the future.

A second thought occurred to him. “Now that so many people know, will it be a problem?”

This was a huge deal. Soon, all of Ye City, the entire Southern Continent—no, the entire world—would know.

Now that Duan Chongxuan had calmed down, he wasn’t sure why he’d summoned Luan Two either. Maybe because he’d missed his father, and Luan Two. He smiled. Since it was already here, he might as well go home for a visit. There were things he really wanted to tell his father. “I’ll make a trip home. That’ll take care of any issues.”

***

IN THE CITY MASTER’S MANSION, Ye Zhiqiu listened impassively while the city guards reported the damage on the streets. Inwardly, he was very pleased. Even though Duan Sheng’an hadn’t personally come, here was a chance to fleece him again.

Once the reports were complete, he issued his orders. “Don’t pursue the responsible party for now. Take time to repair the roads. Use only the best materials. Compile a full list of damages and prepare an itemized account…”

Just then, the steward rushed in frantically. “My lord! Three thousand members of the Northern Imperial Guard have assembled outside the city gates! Their commander demands to see His Highness the Crown Prince!”

***

YIN BIYUE AND DUAN CHONGXUAN walked toward Qiushui Lake together. After that incident in the city, Luo Mingchuan would surely return there to find them. As they walked, the crane-sized luan followed beside them, occasionally nuzzling Duan Chongxuan’s hand with its crest.

Yin Biyue glanced at it several times. He managed to keep his mouth shut, but inside he couldn't hold back his commentary.

You're a luan! A luan! Supreme and majestic!! Why are you acting like a dumb husky?!!

"Why…is it called 'Luan Two' anyway?"

Duan Chongxuan ticked off the Luan's names on his fingers. "They're ordered by age. Luan One, Luan Two, Luan Three…"

Well. Yin Biyue had no words after hearing that.

Thank goodness luan only have the intellect of a five-year-old, he thought. *If it understood, it would probably cry.*

Without warning, a Ye City elder appeared before them and they stopped. He approached and bowed deeply to Duan Chongxuan.

"The commander of the Northern Imperial Guard, Wang Xi, has arrived at the city gates with three thousand elite soldiers. He requests an audience with Your Highness."

Yin Biyue stared at Duan Chongxuan in disbelief. "You called them too?"

No way. Luan could fly across the sea. Could humans too?!

Duan Chongxuan looked just as confused. "I swear I didn't. This has nothing to do with me!"

Chapter 54

YIN BIYUE AND DUAN CHONGXUAN hadn't yet reached Qiushui Lake when they ran into Luo Mingchuan. At the sight of them, he heaved a visible sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness you two are all right. That sudden gale earlier was suspect…"

In truth, his Ghara Pupil Technique had glimpsed that the massive shadow above the clouds was a mythical beast at the Great Ascension level. Now that the windstorm had passed, it seemed the creature hadn't come to destroy Ye City.

Duan Chongxuan glanced back at Luan Two, who was hiding behind him. The bird let out a low croon and stepped forward with guilty, watery eyes. It was as if it knew it had done wrong.

Luo Mingchuan was stunned. "This was it?"

"Luan Two, this is Luo-shixiong. Say hello."

The cyan-winged luan lowered its slender neck and rubbed its crest feathers on Luo Mingchuan's hand. The soft, fluffy sensation left him dazed. A cyan-winged luan at the Great Ascension level had just nuzzled him.

Yin Biyue felt even better now. This sort of worldview-shattering experience shouldn't be his alone. It was a shame this world didn't have huskies so Luo-shixiong couldn't appreciate the essence of Luan Two's expression.

Duan Chongxuan used Luan Two's cuteness to try and distract from his explanation. "I didn't mean to hide my identity, but my family situation is a bit complicated…"

Luo Mingchuan, unusually, cut him off. "No need to explain. You're my shidi. That won't change."

Duan Chongxuan smiled. “I’ll be making a trip home. I’m entrusting Sishixiong to you.”

Yin Biyue thought there was something off about that phrasing. But seeing as Luo Mingchuan nodded solemnly, maybe there wasn’t anything wrong.

Just then, the Ye City elder from earlier returned with Wang Xi. Duan Chongxuan’s expression grew solemn, and even his bearing shifted.

The commander of the Imperial Guard, who was halfway to Great Ascension, had talked with the City Administration and, with Duan Chongxuan’s permission, had entered the city alone after disarming. Now, he stopped three feet away from Duan Chongxuan and performed the Northern Imperial Court’s grand prostration. He both knelt and lowered until he was prone on the ground.

“Your Highness, I wish you peace.”

Everyone except Duan Chongxuan stepped aside to avoid receiving such a salute. Yin Biyue noticed that although Duan Chongxuan’s posture had changed only a little, he now carried himself like someone who stood at the top, revered by thousands.

Duan Chongxuan did not reply, so the silver-armored, middle-aged general remained kneeling. The atmosphere grew heavy.

The Ye City elder excused himself first. Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan thought they should also withdraw, but Duan Chongxuan gave them a look that signaled for them to stay.

After a long pause, he finally spoke in a cool tone. “Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Wang Xi righted himself. Only then did he dare approach. He bent at the waist respectfully. “His Imperial Majesty bade me come.” He glanced at the two outsiders present and hesitated.

“Speak plainly,” Duan Chongxuan ordered. Luan Two stood beside him, its crimson eyes reflecting the same icy aloofness. Yin Biyue realized this was a test. In other words, Duan Chongxuan didn’t fully trust Wang Xi, no matter how flawless his submissive courtesies.

This was a version of Duan Chongxuan he'd never seen before. Still, as Luo Mingchuan had said, no matter who Duan Chongxuan was, he was still their shidi.

The middle-aged general clenched his fists, veins bulging on his forehead, as he visibly wrestled with himself. "His Imperial Majesty is gravely ill. He wishes to see you, Your Highness," he finally said through gritted teeth.

Duan Chongxuan's expression didn't change. "Where is Bai Chongling?"

"Guarding Guangyao Palace with troops, sealing all news, and preventing rebels from entering." Wang Xi dropped to his knees again and thumped his forehead to the ground. "I beg Your Highness to please return to the palace with me at once!"

Duan Chongxuan remained silent.

Wang Xi kowtowed repeatedly without using a shred of protective vital qi. Despite his high cultivation level, his forehead was soon red from striking the ground.

After a long time, Duan Chongxuan answered him. "Wait for me outside the city."

He didn't specify how long, or when they would depart. But Wang Xi snapped his head up, his eyes shining with gratitude, as if Duan Chongxuan's mere agreement was an immense mercy.

He rose to his feet. "Yes, Your Highness." He bent at the waist and retreated three steps before he turned to leave.

Watching this scene, Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan were filled with mixed emotions. Duan Chongxuan was still immersed in the moment until Wang Xi's figure vanished. Only then did the chatterbox and Luan Two heave and relax. He whipped out his folding fan and fanned so vigorously that Luan Two's feathers ruffled.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble," he muttered.

"Can that man be trusted?" Yin Biyue asked.

Duan Chongxuan pulled a long, miserable face. "Mostly."

Yin Biyue suddenly recalled that when they'd been at the shore of the Floating Sea, the boy delivering the notes had asked on Headmaster-xiansheng's behalf: *"Is your father well?"*

The chatterbox had answered breezily, saying that his father was in excellent health, eating and sleeping well, and that there was no need for concern.

At the time, Yin Biyue had found the response odd, but he hadn't dwelled on it. Thinking about it now, he wondered if the Emperor of the Northern Continent, one of the six Second Sages, already been unwell back then. Otherwise, why ask?

Duan Chongxuan stood in silent thought for a long time.

"This trip to the imperial capital may take me quite a while." He turned to Yin Biyue. "Sishixiong, when you return to Cangya, give my regards to Shixiong and Shijie."

Yin Biyue knew this was a farewell, because it was possible Duan Chongxuan might ascend the throne and never return to the Cangya Mountains. Even so, he couldn't agree to relay the message. "Take care on your journey. As for greetings, I won't deliver them. You'll have to do that yourself."

Duan Chongxuan blinked. Then he said solemnly, "I *will* return."

Yin Biyue nodded back. The road ahead was uncertain. No matter how many words were spoken, what use were they?

"No matter what happens, the Cangya Mountains will always be there," Luo Mingchuan said.

This was Luo Mingchuan's way of promising Duan Chongxuan a retreat. Even if everything went wrong, even if he lost his title of crown prince and had nowhere to stand in the Northern Continent, Cangya would still shelter him.

"I'll be careful. I heard Sishixiong mention you two are heading to Xingshan Temple. Stay safe as well." He steadied himself. "Since I've decided to go, the sooner the better. I'm off."

No more words passed between them. Man and bird turned toward the city gates. In the sunset's fading light, their elongated shadows stretched

across the ground.

Duan Chongxuan never looked back. He only raised a hand to wave in farewell. Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan stood beneath the setting sun, watching him depart into the uncertain future.

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AUTUMN WAS FULLY UPON YE CITY, and the wind grew ever bleaker and colder, scattering withered leaves across Wutong Garden. The day after Duan Chongxuan left, rain began to fall. Each autumn shower brought colder air. By the third day, the demonic cultivator hiding in Ye City was subdued and delivered to the City Master's Mansion for interrogation.

Before his capture, Qinglu Sword Sect and Ye City elders had cornered him by Qiushui Lake. A storm churned the lake water. Luo Mingchuan joined the battle, his Chenzhou sword piercing the black-robed figure's wrist. Through the wind and rain, Yin Biyue saw the splatter of dark red blood dilute in the rain and flow into the lake's turbulent waves.

Later, word spread that the demonic cultivator had self-detonated in the City Master's Mansion. Fortunately, no one had been harmed, and it was soon confirmed that he had no accomplices.

Yin Biyue suspected the interrogators had used soul-searching magic.

When the rain stopped, the world felt scrubbed clean. The autumn air was crisp, the west wind brisk. The citizens donned light cotton jackets, taverns swapped cooling wine for warming liquor, and street vendors replaced cold rice cakes and chilled noodles with steaming bowls of lamb-offal soup. Life went on as usual, and the demonic cultivator incident was soon forgotten.

The Qinglu Sword Sect departed Ye City after the rain stopped. Before leaving, Song Tang and the other two bade farewell to Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan. Again, few words were exchanged. Both parties only wished each other well.

That night, Yin Biyue bought two jugs of wine and drank with Luo Mingchuan on the rooftop. Too much had happened recently.

“Shixiong, we’re leaving tomorrow, right?”

“Yes. We head south to Xingshan Temple.”

Yin Biyue gazed up at the bright autumn moon, then down at Qiushui Lake. The bloodstains had long been washed away by the rain, yet they seemed to linger before his eyes. He still remembered the demonic cultivator’s eyes—bloodthirsty, savage, devoid of humanity.

He’d fought brigands on Panlong Ridge and sparred in Mount Chongming’s rings, but he’d never encountered the truly dark side of this world. And the truth was, that darkness was vast.

Yin Biyue took a swig of wine. He was filled with mixed feelings, but he wasn’t afraid. The last time they’d drunk here, they’d been a group of three, while the Cangya disciples in the neighboring courtyards had slept soundly in their beds.

The chatterbox is probably…crossing the sea by now.

He knew this was how cultivators’ friendships worked—a thousand cups of wine when meeting, a single word when parting. He considered Song Tang, Zhong Shan, and Cheng Tianyu friends too. Even though they’d never shared a night of drinking, they’d exchanged that one word at parting.

Luo Mingchuan’s voice drifted on the autumn wind: “Meetings and partings are fickle. Cultivation and life have always been solitary journeys. Don’t cling to attachments.”

Cradling his wine jug, Yin Biyue drank until the wine was half gone. Under the moonlight, his skin was as fair as jade, almost translucent. He knew Luo Mingchuan was comforting him, but he had to ask, “Will you also leave me, Shixiong?”

Luo Mingchuan met his eyes. “Never.”

Like the sun, the moon, and the stars, unchanging for all eternity, I will never leave you.

Chapter 55

YIN BIYUE'S DELIBERATE RESTRAINT kept him sober through drinking many cups of wine, and he successfully avoided the awkwardness of drunken ramblings.

The pair set out at dawn the next day. In the faint morning light, Yin Biyue took one last look at Ye City's gates. Black-brick-walled and bronze-doored, they stood tall and majestic.

Maybe years from now, if fate would have it, I'll visit this place again, he thought.

To travel from Ye City to Xingshan Temple, cutting straight through the Tixiang Mountains was much faster than taking the main southern roads. Due to the recent uproar over the demonic cultivator, the villages at the foot of the Tixiang Mountains, twenty miles outside Ye City, were particularly quiet. The streets were empty, and every home was locked up tight. Only wisps of cooking smoke rose from the chimneys.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan entered the mountains. Since autumn's arrival in the Southern Continent, the wind and rain were relentless. The mountain soil was soft and damp, and the dense forest canopy veiled the sky. Gone were the bright summer days; all that remained was thick, lingering mist. Anyone who wasn't a cultivator would struggle to see three feet past their face.

The two walked along the rugged mountain path at a steady pace, yet the scenery on each side seemed to blur past. Their cultivation had improved significantly since their journey over Panlong Ridge. Even at this leisurely stride, they could cover a hundred miles a day. By dusk, they had traversed half of the sprawling Tixiang Mountains.

As the light faded, Luo Mingchuan stopped. "Let's rest here for the night and continue tomorrow morning."

Naturally, Yin Biyue had no objections.

According to their usual routine, nighttime was for meditation, breath regulation, or cultivation.

The Tixiang Mountains weren't particularly difficult to traverse. On the contrary, they possessed a quiet, secluded beauty. Natural caves were easy to find. As moonlight rose into the sky, its glow was blocked at first by the crisscrossing branches of trees. Fine silvery light filtered through, illuminating a small patch of rock near the cave's entrance.

Their boots on the damp, soft earth suddenly halted. Yin Biyue turned to find Luo Mingchuan gripping his wrist.

Luo Mingchuan's expression was calm, but he shook his head. Yin Biyue sent out his spiritual sense to drift into the cave's interior. There was nothing in the darkness.

At this, Yin Biyue grew alert. A mountain cave should have spiderwebs, vines, insects, or even wild beasts. It shouldn't have nothing at all—unless there was already someone inside.

If another traveling cultivator had claimed the spot, they could just find another place, but Luo Mingchuan sensed demonic energy. Due to the peculiarities of his soul, Yin Biyue's senses far surpassed his cultivation level. When he focused intently, he felt it too.

It was demonic energy, yes, but unlike the cold, sinister aura they'd encountered at Qiushui Lake, this energy was violent and aggravated. Ominously, it was also mixed with a thick stench of blood.

The feud between Daoist and demonic cultivators spanned millions of years, long past the point of reconciliation. Even if they were ordinary cultivators and not Cangya's chief disciple and the Sword Sage's disciple, they wouldn't stand down if they had the strength to fight.

Yin Biyue gripped his sword hilt, but Luo Mingchuan stopped him.

He transmitted his voice: *‹There's only one demonic cultivator inside, below my level. Stay outside the cave, Shidi. Don't come in.›*

Yin Biyue relaxed his hand and decided to follow his shixiong's lead. Acting rashly might cause trouble.

Luo Mingchuan took a step into the cave and vanished on the spot. Despite standing inches away, Yin Biyue felt not the slightest ripple of vital

qi. His senses swept the cave. He could detect the demonic energy seeping from its depths but not Luo Mingchuan's presence.

Luo Mingchuan had shrouded himself in a barrier. He'd reached the third stage in the Ghara Pupil Technique. Not only could he see through others' techniques, he could now conceal himself from detection.

As he moved forward, he projected instead the aura of a cultivator in the Spirit Concentration level. His footsteps were unsteady, his breath uneven; he sounded like any ordinary cultivator seeking shelter for the night in the cave after traveling all day, tired and off guard.

The cave was dark as a night untouched by moonlight. From its recesses came the sound of water dripping onto rock, each drop sharp and echoing. Some demonic cultivation methods required baleful energy, some fresh flesh and blood, and others rotten corpses and bones. Darkness was the most natural cover, allowing demonic energy to ebb and flow like the tide.

Luo Mingchuan stood inside, feigning obliviousness, so he seemed confused as he steadied himself against the rough, damp cave wall. Had he truly been in the Spirit Concentration level, he wouldn't have been able to muster a shred of vital qi.

Perhaps because Luo Mingchuan seemed weak, the demonic cultivator wasn't overly cautious. Concealed within the demonic energy, an arm suddenly shot out from the black robe. The fingers of the cultivator's hand were like iron hooks aimed straight for Luo Mingchuan's throat.

With a rustle of wind, Luo Mingchuan twisted aside at the last second and dodged the strike. Now at close range, he drew Chenzhou from its sheath.

The demonic cultivator sensed danger and withdrew, but Luo Mingchuan's strike was too unexpected, too precise. The force of his true Small Ascension level bore down, sealing off all escape routes.

As the silver blade of Chenzhou descended, the black-robed figure raised his hand and struck again—not at Luo Mingchuan, but at his own chest. The impact of this self-inflicted palm strike sent him flying like a snapped kite in a gale, and he slammed into the cave wall.

Boom!

The entire cave trembled from the force. The suicidal blow shattered two of the demonic cultivator's ribs and left him severely injured, but it'd also granted him unparalleled speed. He'd slipped free of Luo Mingchuan's attack. Compared to the alternative, this was the better, if painful, option.

Luo Mingchuan's eyes flickered with surprise. He hadn't expected such ruthless resolve. Only through countless deadly battles could one develop such terrifying combat instincts. There was no time to waste. He swung again.

Just then, a sword glare flashed like lightning from the cave entrance. It illuminated the entire place—including the dour brow of the sword-wielding, white-haired youth who had just charged into the cave.

When he felt the surge of demonic energy earlier, Yin Biyue's heart had leaped into his throat. Then came the cave's violent tremors. Half the mountain seemed to shake. He was alarmed and entered the cave, sword drawn, without a second thought.

Luo Mingchuan's sword slowed for a second when he saw Yin Biyue enter from the corner of his eye. Even that brief moment was enough for their keenly perceptive foe to vanish.

The surroundings were now saturated with demonic energy, cutting off access to natural spiritual energy. Restricted by his cultivation level, Yin Biyue's vital qi flowed sluggishly, which hindered his sword's momentum. His initial strike had missed.

Before he could recover, pain exploded in his back, as if a blade had pierced his spine.

It was too late to turn around. Yin Biyue thrust blindly with a backhand strike, only to see a white shadow flit past. A gentle force shoved him aside. Before he could steady himself, the push sent him tumbling all the way back to the entrance of the cave.

He realized with a start that no blade had struck him. He had reacted to pure killing intent.

When he refocused, Luo Mingchuan stood where he'd been moments ago. Chenzhou had pierced the demonic cultivator's heart, pinning him to the ground. The thick stench of blood permeated the cave. From Yin

Biyue's entrance to the demonic cultivator's fall, everything had happened in the span of a breath. Now, all was settled.

Yin Biyue approached and saw dark blood pooling beneath those black robes, the ghastly pale face frozen in a twisted snarl. Luo Mingchuan pulled out his sword, and blood spattered against the cave walls. His hand was steadfast and his expression calm. The corpse withered before their eyes, decaying into a pile of bones within moments. The black blood seeped into the earth and disappeared without a trace.

"Shixiong…"

Luo Mingchuan turned to find Yin Biyue staring at him with a blank, almost forlorn look. It startled him. Could he have scared his shidi?

Yin Biyue dropped his gaze to the tiny wound on Luo Mingchuan's sword arm. The bleeding had already stopped, but tendrils of black demonic energy still clung to it.

"Shixiong, you're hurt."

"Just a scratch," Luo Mingchuan said, smiling with relief. "It's nothing."

He circulated his vital qi for one full cycle to purge the demonic energy. The wound closed completely, leaving only a small bloodstain on his white robes. In the darkened cave, it was barely noticeable.

Yin Biyue pursed his lips in silence. If he hadn't charged in so recklessly and been such a distraction, Luo Mingchuan wouldn't have gotten hurt.

"All right, let's go," Luo Mingchuan said.

Yin Biyue let Luo Mingchuan take him by the wrist and lead him out of the cave. Following the sound of water, they walked to a small stream. Under the silver moonlight, the babbling brook flowed over smooth stones. Droplets like silver shards splashed across the moss at the edge of the stream. Luo Mingchuan began washing his sword.

"Shidi, you're already doing very well. I couldn't have done better when I was your age."

Yin Biyue stayed quiet. He knew his shixiong was comforting him, but he still felt useless. Just like those dumbass teammates leeching

experience from the protagonist in every power fantasy novel ever, he feared he would only drag Luo Mingchuan down and get him hurt.

Once again, he burned with the desire to grow stronger. Just like that moonlit night after returning from the academy, when he'd wanted to take control of his life. He wanted to be strong enough to stand by Luo Mingchuan's side during battles, not wait anxiously somewhere on the fringes. Strong enough to fight alongside him, rather than be his weakness.

This was the first time Luo Mingchuan had seen his shidi so subdued. Although Yin Biyue had always been quiet, over time, Luo Mingchuan had learned to read his moods. Yin Biyue's concern made Luo Mingchuan feel warm and cared for, but it also stung him with guilt. If he were stronger—strong enough to end a fight unscathed—his shidi wouldn't be upset.

Seeing Yin Biyue so sullen, Luo Mingchuan couldn't find the right words to comfort him. Something came over him, and he reached out with the same hand that'd been rinsing his sword and pinched Yin Biyue's cheek. The skin beneath his touch was softer than the finest silk, smooth and cool like jade steeped in icy water.

Yin Biyue jolted at the sudden chill, then turned to stare at Luo Mingchuan in shock.

His wide-eyed expression made Luo Mingchuan burst out laughing. "Shidi, if you keep sulking, I'll keep pinching you!" He gave Yin Biyue's cheek another playful tug before he let go.

Yin Biyue immediately covered his face. Then, realizing how embarrassing that looked, he dropped his hands. He fixed Luo Mingchuan with what he hoped was a stern glare. "Shixiong, I'll be of age in two years. I'm not a child!"

Luo Mingchuan cleared his throat. "Understood." But he kept his hands behind his back, rubbed his fingers gently, and savored the lingering sensation of softness.

Their playful scuffle lifted Yin Biyue's spirits, though he'd been stunned by the interaction. In his memories, Luo Mingchuan wasn't the type to joke around. When he shed his usual composed demeanor, he seemed…livelier. More real.

No matter how his shixiong was, though, he was still his shixiong. And Yin Biyue would grow stronger—just like him.

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DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS, there lay an ancient temple. Xingshan Temple, one of the “Twin Buddhist Temples,” surpassed even Jiekong Temple in legacy and orthodox teachings. It was a sacred place, the closest to the Buddha in the world, and was revered by Buddhist cultivators across the realm.

Yet the place to focus on at this moment wasn’t a grand hall or a resplendent Buddhist pagoda, but a secluded meditation room. Ancient beams, worn by time, supported the roof. The flickering lights were dim. An elderly monk sat before a table, his fingers moving over prayer beads, his gaunt face etched with compassion. He held a slip of paper to the candle flame, then watched it crumble to ash in an instant. The night wind from the window scattered the remnants beyond recovery.

Just like his years in Buddhist cultivation, worldly affairs were but fleeting smoke.

The gray-robed monk standing beside him hesitated to speak. “Shishu…”

The elder monk chanted the name of the Buddha, then spoke slowly. “With Buddhist principles in one’s heart, killing and saving are both acts of mercy. Headmaster-xiansheng and Master Wuwang have made the same choice as me.”

The young monk bowed his head. “This disciple has received guidance.”

Chapter 56

THE TIXIANG MOUNTAINS ran north to south, and the further south one traveled, the more vibrant the scenery became. Deep greens intertwined with gold and interspersed with crimson maple leaves were bright and colorful beneath frost and fog. When Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan reached the mountain peak, their sight was filled with the endless sea of leaves below. As the wind rustled through the groves, the leaves swayed like waves lapping the shore, the sound akin to a distant sea.

“Beyond this mountain is Xingshan Temple,” Luo Mingchuan said.

Yin Biyue gazed into the distance. Amid the swaths of red maples, the silhouettes of green-tiled roofs and upturned eaves were visible halfway up the mountain. The temple ahead looked like a pearl set within a raging sea of fire.

After the Great Dao-Demon War and the Heavenly Tribulation, many powerful figures perished, and numerous sects lost their legacies to the flames of war. Most of the major sects today had risen to prominence and flourished only during the Age of Spiritual Decline that followed the tribulation.

Not Xingshan Temple. Although it didn’t have a Second Sage, its legacy had never broken. It terms of orthodox Buddhist teachings, it surpassed even Jiekong Temple, which boasted the Second Sage Master Wuwang.

Yin Biyue had never interacted with Buddhist cultivators before. His impression of them from the Flower-Plucking Tournament stopped around “reserved and taciturn.” When people spoke of the Twin Buddhist Temples, the word “compassion” was often the only thing that came to mind.

As they trekked up the incline, Luo Mingchuan thought of the miraculous skills of Xingshan Temple’s medical cultivators and calmed. Perhaps there was hope yet for his shidi’s white hair affliction.

The temple was nestled into the mountainside. From afar, its gray-green roofs and apricot-yellow walls rose in layers to sprawl across the landscape. A temple of this size housed at least a thousand cultivating monks. Yet its mountain gate was not particularly grand. Compared to other major sects, it even seemed a little run-down.

Having weathered countless years of storms, the large characters carved at the top—*Xingshan Temple*—retained only their outlines; the original brushstrokes had long faded. Despite its worn appearance, this stone gate had maintained its original form from the Age of Sages. It was actually three gates that stood side by side. The center gate was made in a grand palatial style that bore heavy eaves, with two smaller gates on each side. They symbolized the three Dharma gates of Nirvana: the "Gate of Emptiness," the "Gate of Formlessness," and the "Gate of Nonaction." This was the classic architectural look of temples from that era. Every visitor here understood just from the sight of the gates the history and glory of this sect.

A young monk in bright-yellow kasaya was posted outside the mountain gate, his expression serene. He watched as two figures approached together along the mountain path. Although they wore the same Cangya robes, their bearings were starkly different. One was a refined gentleman like elegant jade, while the other had white hair and eyes as cold as ice.

The young monk recalled a scripture he had once chanted: "The body is born from formlessness, like an illusion manifesting myriad images. The illusory mind and consciousness are originally nonexistent; sin and blessing are both empty, with nothing to cling to."[4] Whether noble and upright or cold and unapproachable, these were merely appearances that could not represent a person's true nature. He chanted the name of the Buddha and stepped forward to greet them.

"Esteemed benefactors, please follow this humble monk into the temple."

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan were taken aback. They hadn't expected someone to be waiting for them. Then they realized that with the number of esteemed monks residing in the temple, every movement on this

mountain must have been within their grasp. Perhaps the duo's reason for coming here had already been discerned.

"Thank you." Luo Mingchuan bowed.

The young monk sidestepped the gesture and murmured "Amitabha Buddha" before he led them through the gate.

As Yin Biyue stepped past the threshold, he sensed something and turned back. Carved on the back of the tallest stone gate were words that said: *The Sea of Suffering Is Boundless.* Maybe it was all in his head, but he thought these characters were more distinct than the inscription on the front.

The young monk, eyes downcast, led them past numerous prayer halls. Along the way, gray-robed monks paused to bow to him in respect. Only then did it occur to Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan that this monk held a high rank. He was likely a personal disciple of one of the temple's high monks.

The temple was massive. Some monks swept the grounds, while others chanted scriptures. An atmosphere of serene solemnity, free from clamor, pervaded the space. Walking through it, they were enveloped in the faint fragrance of sandalwood incense. Despite the peaceful nature of the place, Yin Biyue couldn't relax. It was as if beneath this peaceful facade, a cold and cruel eye watched their every move from the shadows.

Finally, they entered the temple's magnificent golden-roofed great hall. It was towering and spacious. Bright-yellow prayer flags and small, conical chatras hung from the beams, layer upon layer, immersed in swirls of incense smoke. At a glance, it gave the illusion of infinity. The golden Buddha statue was colossal—onlookers had to tilt their heads back to see its face. In comparison, the elderly monk standing before it in his golden kasaya seemed almost miniature. But no one would consider him insignificant, because he was the abbot of Xingshan Temple.

One of the last two remaining monks of the Jing generation, Master Jinghai was a venerable monk from the same era as the Second Sage Master Wuwang of Jiekong Temple. Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue had never imagined that such a prominent figure would await them. As they stepped forward to bow, they noticed many other monks were gathered in the hall. Their auras were restrained, their cultivation levels were indiscernible, and they all wore yellow kasaya.

The two performed Daoist salutes, which the monks returned in the Buddhist fashion.

In such a grand reception, the first to speak would naturally be Jinghai. His tone was calm and measured, like the recitation of scripture. “Esteemed benefactors, you have come a long way and your journey must have been arduous. This humble monk already knows of Benefactor Yin’s purpose here. It is no difficult matter. Please come with me for further discussion.”

His latter words were directed solely at Yin Biyue, their implication unmistakable.

Yin Biyue glanced at Luo Mingchuan. Before they could introduce themselves, the monk knew who they were and that they sought medical treatment. His cultivation level was profound indeed.

Luo Mingchuan hadn’t expected Master Jinghai would so readily agree to personally assist, but it was well-known that Buddhists were compassionate, so he thought little of it. It was a relief that his shidi’s white hair affliction would be addressed. He nodded at Yin Biyue.

At the nod, Yin Biyue followed Jinghai to the back. Behind the majestic great hall was a secluded meditation room, outside of which stood an upright pine. Incense burned inside the dimly lit room. Despite the midday hour, Jinghai lit the candle on the table.

The two sat facing each other across the table. Yin Biyue wasn’t particularly concerned about his white hair; treatment was the last thing on his mind. He was mentally mapping every step they had taken earlier to reach this room. Now that he was here, he was certain that beneath the entire Xingshan Temple lay an immensely powerful array. The *Sea of Suffering Is Boundless* inscription on the back of the mountain gate was a part of its core. He believed it was the legendary “Great Golden Light Array” from the Age of Sages, capable of repelling even Sages. The only question was how much of its original power remained.

Jinghai produced a slightly worn kaya-wood weiqi[5] board. “Benefactor Yin, would you do me the honor of a game?”

Weiqi had nothing to do with medical treatment, but after meeting Headmaster-xiansheng, Yin Biyue was growing used to the cryptic ways of

prominent figures.

“My skills are rudimentary, Master. You’ll have to forgive me.”

The abbot paid no heed to Yin Biyue’s modesty. He pushed the bowl of black stones forward, inviting Yin Biyue to take the first move.

He didn’t decline. He placed his first stone directly on the board’s central point, the Tianyuan. An opener like this was rare. It was either the hallmark of a uniquely skilled master—or a dummy who didn’t know strategy. Yin Biyue was neither. Ever since entering Xingshan Temple, he’d felt a weight on his chest that needed an outlet via this move.

From an etiquette standpoint, opening on the Tianyuan against a senior could be seen as disrespectful. The elderly monk creased his brow but said nothing. He placed his own stone.

For a time, the only sound in the quiet meditation room was the click of stones being placed.

About twenty moves in, the game’s rhythm remained peaceful. Then, Jinghai spoke: “I’ve heard Benefactor Yin hails from Lanyuan Academy. The academy embraces all schools of thought. I wonder if you have studied Buddhism?”

“My learning is shallow. I’ve never studied Buddhist teachings,” Yin Biyue replied.

This wasn’t false modesty. Even though Lanyuan Academy’s library was decked with Buddhist texts, Yin Biyue had just embarked on the art of the sword at the time and had little interest in Buddhist studies. However, Luo Mingchuan suddenly came to mind. His Ghara Pupil Technique was Buddhist magic.

The elderly monk placed another stone and recounted a story from the Buddhist scripture, *Samyuktagama*.

The tale was simple, one that Yin Biyue had heard long ago. It told of a ship at sea with five hundred on board. One among them was a thief intent on killing everyone, and another was an ordained man, a bhikkhu, who possessed six supernatural powers. One of the powers was “Knowledge of Births and Deaths,” which allowed him to foresee the common people’s

good and evil deeds, and their karmic retribution. Foreseeing the thief's actions, the bhikkhu killed the thief first to save the others.

"He would rather break the precepts and bear the karmic retribution of killing one to save all others. This is the great compassion of 'entering hell first,'" Jinghai concluded.

Yin Biyue remained silent. The game had shifted at this point. His "long dragon" was cornered, leaving only three liberties left.

However, Jinghai didn't place another stone. Instead, his voice turned stern. "Benefactor Yin, I know you are a compassionate man. Are you aware that the Star of Calamity has descended, and the world stands on the brink of chaos?"

Jerking his head up, Yin Biyue saw the elderly monk's brows drawn together, his eyes gleaming with an intimidating intensity. Yin Biyue's heart sank as he mentally reviewed their earlier entrance into the great hall. There had been many monks in yellow kasaya—twelve of them in fact. If they'd been the four chief monks and eight administrators, it meant Xingshan Temple had mobilized its strongest cultivators!

Yin Biyue wanted to draw his sword on the spot but restrained himself. Since Jinghai had lured Yin Biyue here, leaving wouldn't be easy. Forcing his way out of this meditation room was impossible against a powerful Great Ascensioner. He remained calm. He didn't reach for his sword, nor did he move. Instead of attacking, he submitted himself to instruction.

"Please enlighten me, Master."

"This humble monk has cultivated the 'Dharma Eye' for a thousand years. Benefactor Luo, who now stands in the great hall, is the Star of Calamity. Should the Demon Lord, slain by the Linyuan sword, be reborn, it will be through his flesh that he awakens." Jinghai's tone was even but unrelenting.

"Impossible!" Yin Biyue refused to believe it.

Jinghai had never been contradicted by a junior like this, but he showed no anger. "It is not only I who sees this. Headmaster-xiansheng and Master Wuwang have witnessed the same vision."

Yin Biyue froze. Jinghai’s words struck him in the heart like a bolt of lightning.

Chapter 57

YIN BIYUE STILL REMEMBERED that the OG's attempt to kill Luo Mingchuan was at Headmaster-xiansheng's behest.

"Never mind if you weren't able to kill him." So Headmaster-xiansheng had said before their tea and stargazing session.

Had Headmaster-xiansheng known even then that they would come to Xingshan Temple, that another opportunity to kill Luo Mingchuan would arise? But if even Headmaster-xiansheng hadn't acted directly, why were these monks willing? Was it that Jinghai and Headmaster-xiansheng saw different futures? That Jinghai, limited by his cultivation, could only perceive part of the karma? Such prominent figures had no reason to lie. What had they seen that led them to decide unanimously that Luo Mingchuan must die?

What about the Sword Sage? As the one who could see the furthest in this world, what was *his* choice? A thousand thoughts raced through Yin Biyue's mind, tangling into a knot that that made it hard to breathe. He just wanted to flip the table and scream.

Open your eyes and take a good look. The one standing out there is the saintly pro-ta-go-nist! I *was the one who wanted to be the final Boss! Me, you hear?! If the Demon Lord isn't dead and can really reincarnate as the legends say, it'll be through me!*

If you want to kill someone, kill me*!* (╯°□°)╯ ┻━┻

"Everyone knows my shixiong is kind and—"

Jinghai cut him off sharply. "Once the Demon Lord reincarnates and descends upon this world, he will no longer be your shixiong! He will become a demon!"

Seeing Yin Biyue's conflicted expression, he softened his tone.

"I've heard that at the Flower-Plucking Tournament, Benefactor Yin showed mercy to opponents in the same ring. This matter concerns the lives

of all under heaven. I trust you understand the greater good and will make the right choice. Our temple will not harm Benefactor Luo. We merely ask him to remain in the Pavilion of Quiet Reflection. Under the protection of Buddha's light, no evil can enter. Even the Demon Lord's soul would be barred from reincarnating here. This is the best solution to avoid calamity."

Yin Biyue stared blankly at the game board. Jinghai didn't press further and allowed him time to gather his thoughts. The meditation room was deathly silent, save for the sound of wind rustling the lonely pine outside.

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MEANWHILE, IN THE GREAT HALL on the other side of the wall, Luo Mingchuan was surrounded by twelve monks. He patiently listened to the Chief Sermonizer recount his life: his birth month and year, when he began cultivation, his life's journey, and every technique he'd ever practiced.

And then the topic turned to the Demon Lord.

"Our temple has no intention of harming your life. We merely ask you to reside in the Pavilion of Quiet Reflection for a few years. Once the calamity has passed, you may leave."

The Pavilion of Quiet Reflection was where Xingshan Temple disciplined wayward disciples. Sometimes they also imprisoned deviant cultivators or heinous criminals. It was equivalent to Cangya's dungeon, where an oppressive force crushed the body in confinement, cut off from the light of day.

After listening, Luo Mingchuan showed no anger, nor did he refute them in indignation. He was calm, almost bewildered. "What have I done wrong?"

The colossal Buddha statue gazed down with compassionate yet indifferent eyes. Buddhas did not speak, and none of the high monks present could answer his question.

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BACK IN THE MEDITATION ROOM, Yin Biyue heaved a sigh. “If it benefits the common people, I would gladly die.”

The tension in the room dissipated. Jinghai smiled, the wrinkles on his face smoothing with relief. The old man opened his mouth, ready to praise Yin Biyue, when a streak of sword glare flashed past as fast as lightning. It was aimed right for his face.

With a clatter, the entire board of black and white stones scattered like raindrops on the floor. Yin Biyue lunged forward after his sword glare.

Jinghai’s expression hardened. He waved his sleeve and unleashed a surge of energy to clash with the blade. But the strike hadn’t been aimed at him; it struck the door instead.

Boom!

Dust exploded as the wooden door and half the wall were blasted apart from the force of the attack. Yin Biyue, sword in hand, shot through the opening to land in the great hall—right in front of Luo Mingchuan.

Every monk in the hall stared at him in shock. This was beyond unexpected. What Breakthrough-level cultivator would dare draw their sword before a Great Ascensioner, let alone the abbot of Xingshan Temple? The monks thought everything had happened too fast, but Yin Biyue knew otherwise. Only a moment had passed between Jinghai’s missed counter and Yin Biyue appearing protectively in front of Luo Mingchuan, but for Yin Biyue, every second had stretched into an age of its own.

From the moment Jinghai spoke of the Star of Calamity, Yin Biyue had been calculating, waiting for this instant—when a Great Ascensioner let down his guard. He knew if he didn’t seize the opening, it would never come again.

He glanced back at Luo Mingchuan. Fortunately, he’d made it in time.

He turned to the room and spoke in a loud voice. “My shixiong has committed no crime. Why must he be punished?”

After he spoke, a metallic taste flooded his mouth, and his meridians screamed in agony. Even with the element of surprise, breaking out of a Great Ascensioner’s blockade had cost him dearly. Nonetheless, Yin Biyue straightened and forced the pain down.

Luo Mingchuan stared at Yin Biyue standing protectively before him, his sword brandished. Shidi must have learned everything but chosen to believe in him. He would believe in himself too.

He stepped forward, standing side by side with Yin Biyue. “I am not the Demon Lord,” he said solemnly. “I do not believe your claims.”

Jinghai’s brows locked together like those of an angered guardian deity. He radiated with the authority of a newly illuminated arhat.

“Benefactor Luo carries a demonic aura. Benefactor Yin, do you intend to aid evil? Where do you place the lives of all beings?” Jinghai unleashed the aura of Great Ascension he had been suppressing, and even the nearest monk involuntarily retreated two steps.

Yin Biyue didn’t flinch. “Absurd! My shixiong was injured fighting a demonic cultivator in Tixiang Mountains, and now you accuse him of being one?!”

The Chief Sermonizer, Jingyun, spoke up. “That can be easily determined.”

As soon as he spoke, his golden kasaya puffed and billowed. He pointed one palm to the sky and the other to the ground. After his palms and all ten fingers spun and wove uncannily in an intricate seal, a beaming golden light burst forth. A massive golden Buddhist seal materialized behind him.

The Great Buddhist Mudra!

The massive seal descended with tremendous force, carrying the oppressive might of the Great Ascension straight toward Luo Mingchuan. Like a gale had blasted through the hall, the bronze censer on the altar toppled, and the heavy canopy of prayer flags and chatras lifted high into the air. The entire majestic hall quaked under its power.

The massive seal closed in. Luo Mingchuan shoved Yin Biyue behind him and stepped forward. Slowly, deliberately, he raised his hands. With decisiveness and fluidity, he mirrored Jingyun's movements. The form behind him materialized in an instant. Luo Mingchuan unleashed an identical—and flawlessly authentic—Great Buddhist Mudra right back at Jingyun!

Crash!

The two great golden light seals collided, the shockwave shredding the surrounding banners to pieces. Every monk except Jinghai and Chief Sermonizer Jingyun was forced back three steps.

No one could believe that Luo Mingchuan, at mid-stage Small Ascension, had just matched a Great Ascensioner blow for blow.

Jingyun was unsurprised, however. "Benefactor Luo, you've already fallen to demonic ways. Your eyes—"

Luo Mingchuan's eyes had turned pitch-black, darker than the deepest night.

Yin Biyue cut him off. "Nonsense! The Ghara Pupil Technique is *your* temple's magic!"

"But what Benefactor Luo practiced isn't the Ghara Pupil Technique. It's the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net," Jinghai interjected. He turned to Yin Biyue. "Benefactor Yin, it's not too late to see reason. Buddhists are compassionate. We speak reason. Your earlier transgressions can be forgiven."

Yin Biyue felt Luo Mingchuan stiffen beside him. He knew Jinghai had lured him away earlier to avoid confronting Xihua Peak. Jinghai wouldn't have struck Yin Biyue because he was wary of the Sword Sage. He could only trap Luo Mingchuan.

Xingshan Temple had no Second Sage, but it did have the Great Golden Light Array. Even if Luo Mingchuan's master Zhengyangzi came demanding his disciple's release, they could justify it with "the greater good." If words failed, the array would enforce their will. What was more terrifying was Jinghai's mention of Headmaster-xiansheng and Master Wuwang. The will of not one, but multiple Second Sages was behind this scheme.

Yin Biyue pieced together most of the puzzle almost instantly. He burst out laughing. “What magnificent Buddhist compassion! What noble-sounding reason!”

The monks closed in, their eyes blazing with fury.

Jinghai’s anger roared through the hall. “You will dare to draw your sword before the Buddha? You dare disrespect him?!”

When Master Jingyun had attacked earlier, it could have been considered exterminating evil before the Buddha. But if Yin Biyue were to draw his weapon now, he’d immediately become a heretic in the monks’ eyes. Most cultivators, no matter how arrogant, would hesitate and grow wary if branded with “disrespecting the Buddha.”

The Sword Sage and his disciples, however, were exceptions to the rule. Had Yan Xing been there, he might have remembered their shifu’s teachings and responded the same way he had to the Baopu Sect elder: *“The Buddha neither birthed me nor taught me. Why should I respect him?”*

Yin Biyue wasn’t Yan Xing. He wouldn’t blaspheme so casually.

“I don’t believe in the Buddha,” he said calmly. “I don’t believe in anything…but if I must believe in something, I believe in my shixiong.”

What Demon Lord’s reincarnation, what Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net? I don’t believe a single word—no, not even the punctuation marks—you monks say.

Chapter 58

AFTER YIN BIYUE MADE HIS SPEECH, the atmosphere in the great hall grew oppressive. The monks' expressions were as dark as ink. They itched to eliminate these two irreverent demons on the spot.

"In that case, I pray you will not blame me for being unkind…" Jinghai's voice was icy. Since he'd entered Great Ascension six hundred years ago, no one had dared defy his authority. After all his painstaking attempts to persuade Yin Biyue, his patience was at its limit. Seeing the young man's continued refusal to see reason, he no longer wished to talk sense into him.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan exchanged a look. Neither had any intention of behaving as expected. Even their earlier argument with the monks had been a ruse to assess their cultivation strengths. Before Jinghai could finish speaking, they struck.

Yin Biyue lunged forward, angled his sword, and swung straight for Jinghai and Jingyun, the two strongest cultivators present. His sword moved like a mighty river cleaving through mountains. The prayer flags and chatras whipped upward from the sheer force of the strike.

No one expected a mere Breakthrough cultivator to challenge two Great Ascensioners head-on. Still, to a Great Ascensioner, Yin Biyue's attack was nothing more than a feeble trickle, easily crushed. The two monks, mindful of his status as the Sword Sage's disciple, held back their full strength. They were determined to keep him in the temple, though, despite their restraint. They raised their hands to form mudras, and the golden light seals flashed into existence to block all of the sword's momentum.

At the same time, Luo Mingchuan unleashed another Great Buddhist Mudra aimed straight at the weakest monks in the hall—the guest-prefects and administrators.

The great hall, bolstered by golden light, granted Buddhist techniques greater power. He had matched Jingyun earlier, and his attack now tore a hole in their encirclement. Yin Biyue's sword momentum was about to clash with the seals from the two Great Ascensioners, but he suddenly darted backward and abandoned the blow. Luo Mingchuan, a step behind, shielded Yin Biyue's retreat. With one hand, Luo Mingchuan countered Jinghai and Jingyun's seals, while he swept his sleeve at Yin Biyue with the other, sending him flying outward with a gust.

Luo Mingchuan shot through the gap right behind Yin Biyue. As soon as they burst out of the great hall, they sprinted toward the mountain behind the temple. The entire sequence lasted mere seconds. Their coordination was nearly flawless.

They knew their only chance was to strike while their opponents were unprepared. The longer they delayed, the more their lower cultivation would hamper them. Yin Biyue's sword technique "Spiraling River Comes and Goes," though it had looked impressive, had never been meant to engage Jinghai and Jingyun. A river surged forward unrelentingly yet bent and turned back when it must, its flow both innate and forthright.

What Yin Biyue hadn't expected was that, when Jingyun and Jinghai's seals caught up, Luo Mingchuan would prioritize sending him to safety over defending against the seals. His shixiong had taken the full brunt of the attack.

But they couldn't pause for a second. They raced across the temple rooftops, pushing their vital qi to the limit, until their meridians nearly burst. In seconds, they crossed a thousand feet.

The mountain gate would be the hardest barrier to breach. It was heavily guarded, not to mention it was where the core of the Great Golden Light Array lay. Their only option for escape was this risky dash toward the back mountains.

They moved fast, but the oppressive aura of the Great Ascensioners came faster. With a mere thought, Jinghai vanished from the great hall and materialized directly in their path. Jingyun followed closely behind to block their retreat.

The gap in cultivation levels was overwhelming.

Worse, gray-robed monks swarmed like the morning tide from all directions. They didn't pursue the pair across rooftops, but sped along the ground. They began to chant sutras in unison, their voices low. When synchronized, the chanting merged to form a tremendous power. Amid the echoing chants, a protective veil of golden light that reached the skies enveloped the entire Xingshan Temple. The Great Golden Light Array would now activate. As long as the chants continued, the array would not dissipate.

Calm and indifferent, Jinghai stood steady as a mountain, one hand turning prayer beads, the other gripping a golden Zen staff. When Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue approached, the staff shook violently. The four rings at its head chimed together. The sound traveled as far and wide as ringing bells.

The Zen staff was originally used in Buddhist practice to strike and awaken monks who grew weary during sutra recitations. It was a most solemn and majestic instrument that radiated immense power. The strike Jinghai now executed was called the "Staff of Great Compassion," a culmination of his life's mastery. With his full strength unleashed, even the golden tiles on the temple roof were sent flying by the force of his energy.

Luo Mingchuan advanced, his speed undiminished. He held the Chenzhou sword before him, much like a Zen staff that weighed a thousand pounds, unyielding as a mountain.

Clang!

The Staff of Great Compassion clashed with the longsword in a deafening impact. The countless golden tiles swirling in the air shattered into fine dust. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of Luo Mingchuan's lips, but his feet did not retreat an inch.

Jinghai looked at his pitch-black eyes and the identical Staff of Great Compassion he'd just unleashed. "As I thought," he muttered coldly. "A demon…"

At the same time, Yin Biyue turned to face Jingyun behind him. Countless blinding rays burst from his blade, outflaming the thick veil of golden light, as though the bright sun itself had risen within the Buddhist temple.

Without hesitation, he struck with his strongest move—the Sword Sage's Broad Daylight!

Yihu seemed to fully resonate with its master's resolve. Furious and resolute, its shrill cry pierced through the great sound of chanting and soaring straight into the heavens. This attack was truer to its essence and more formidable than the one he had unleashed at the foot of Mount Chongming.

His eyes lowered, Jingyun pressed his palms together and moved his lips silently as he recited the sutras. A faint golden hue gradually overtook his exposed skin. When the sword's edge neared his face, he remained rooted. His entire body now shimmered like he'd been gilt in pure gold. His expression was one of pity and cold indifference, like a true Buddha. This was the Buddhist technique, "Immeasurable Dharma Body."

The strongest sword of the mortal world clashed with the grave Buddha of the heavens.

The sword's shriek abruptly ceased. Like clay oxen melting away in the sea, the blazing sunlight of the sword was absorbed into the Buddha's magnificent light.

This was within expectations. Yin Biyue wasn't disappointed. He knew he wasn't the Sword Sage. Even if he had learned the Broad Daylight strike, he had grasped but a fraction of its true essence. How could he possibly neutralize a Great Ascension-stage attack like Immeasurable Dharma Body?

Thus, the moment he struck, his left hand flicked slightly. A string of sandalwood prayer beads shot straight toward Jingyun's face. It was the mountain-opening gift he'd received from the powerful monk of Jiekong Temple at the foot of Mount Chongming. In the next instant, Yin Biyue's expression changed. To his shock, Yihu had actually pierced the golden kasaya and left a thin bloody scratch on Jingyun's chest.

Jingyun was also stunned. He had neutralized the momentum of Broad Daylight, but he'd failed to block the edge of the Yihu sword. It was inconceivable, defying all reason, but it had happened.

Before he could react, the string of prayer beads hurtled toward him as they rapidly expanded in size. Recognizing that they were a spiritual

device from Jiekong Temple, he hesitated. In that brief pause, the beads exploded.

Yin Biyue wasted no time retreating. He knew the depths of his sword's strike had reached its limit. At the same time, the clash of Luo Mingchuan's and Jinghai's Staff of Great Compassion had ended in a stalemate. With a twist of his wrist, Luo Mingchuan angled his sword and swiftly withdrew, racing alongside Yin Biyue toward the back mountains. Their goal was to break away, not to compete against Great Ascensioners.

Behind them, the golden roof of the temple hall, unable to withstand the residual shockwave of the battle, collapsed with a thunderous crash. Yet the gray-robed monks below never ceased their chants. Their voices reached a crescendo, like a sudden cloudburst full of thunder and lightning. To Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan, it was almost deafening enough to shatter their cores.

Jingyun and Jinghai no longer pursued them. No one else in the temple would bar their way either. The Great Golden Light Array was now fully activated. The entire Xingshan Temple was an iron bowl turned upside down.

The two sprinted away without heed to their injuries, pushing through the excruciating pain, thought it felt as if every bone in their bodies had shattered. Yin Biyue's expression was impassive as he tightened his grip on his sword hilt. Blood dripped down the blade.

It was not Jingyun's blood. Immeasurable Dharma Body had failed to snap Yihu, but the strength of the defense had traveled up Yin Biyue's blade and nearly shattered his consciousness. He glanced at Luo Mingchuan and noticed that he had bound his right hand to the Chenzhou sword with strips torn from his robe, now soaked in blood. Yin Biyue had heard the sound of bones cracking back in the great hall when Luo Mingchuan had exchanged palm strikes with Jinghai and Jingyun. His wrist bones must have shattered then. And these were only the obvious injuries. Who knew how severe the damage to his internal organs and meridians was.

The fact that the two of them had survived a cross-level battle against the strongest cultivators of Xingshan Temple today would be enough to shock the entire cultivation world. But they had reached the end of their ropes.

The edge of the array drew closer. Simply approaching it sent the almighty aura contained within rushing toward them. When they'd first entered the temple, *The Sea of Suffering Is Boundless* had been carved on the mountain gates. Here, in the lush green hills, the words *Turn Back to See the Shore* blazed in golden light. Under the bloodred sunset on the horizon, the inscription looked harrowing.

Luo Mingchuan did not stop. "Shidi, do you still trust me?"

This wasn't a question of doubt. Rather, what he was about to do next bordered on madness. If possible, he would have preferred to walk alone in the boundless sea of suffering ahead.

Yin Biyue didn't hesitate. "Yes."

It was not that they couldn't turn back, but that they refused to.

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DARK CLOUDS CONCEALED THE MOON, leaving the night sea unusually still and black. A massive shadow that moved in silence split the waves. The ship was over a hundred feet tall, with five stories and twelve masts. Such a colossal vehicle raced across the sea like the wind, less like a ship and more like a small island. The dragon treasure ship that belonged to the Northern Continent's imperial family had an anchor that alone weighed two thousand pounds. Launching it required two to three hundred men. A single day of full-speed sailing consumed six hundred pounds of spirit stones. They were a type of energy source, and so called because they could be used by spiritual cultivators. Also called "crystal stones," they were one of the universal currencies across the continents.

A privately controlled mine of spirit stones was the foundation of any major sect's confidence. The same went for other resources.

No matter how powerful Cangya was in the Western Continent, it still faced opposition from the Baopu Sect and Jiekong Temple. No matter how richly endowed the Southern Continent was, its resources were divided between Qinglu Sword Sect and Xingshan Temple. Similarly, in the Central

Continent, the prominent clans that pledged allegiance to the Lianjian Sect and Lanyuan Academy surrendered large amounts of wealth each year.

Only the Northern imperial family monopolized all the resources of their continent.

Duan Chongxuan stood at the forefront of the fourth-level deck and looked over the horizon. The sea wind billowed through his sleeves, lifting the layers of his robes. The silver ribbons of his jade crown fluttered wildly in the air. He peered at the sea from the bow as though gazing down from on high at a crowd of prostrate worshippers below.

This was the third night of their voyage. The moon was absent, leaving only the dark expanse of the sea in all directions.

“Your Highness, the night wind at sea is terribly cold…” the commander behind him urged.

Duan Chongxuan ignored the unspoken request. “Wang Xi, how long have you served in the army?”

Wang Xi bowed slightly. “Four hundred years ago, I passed the examinations and joined the Cloudchaser Cavalry, serving as right army captain under General Zhou. Later, by His Imperial Majesty’s grace, I was promoted to commander of the Imperial Guard in the palace.”

“Where are we headed?”

The commander was horrified, unsure why Duan Chongxuan would ask such a question. He dropped to his knees with a thud. “Your servant’s duty is, of course, to escort Your Highness back to the palace.”

Duan Chongxuan shook his head. “How much did the Prince of Xian offer you to make you think the chips of betrayal were enough?” His tone was level, but the words struck the deck like a thunderclap.

The commander raised his head. The veneer of reverence and trepidation slowly faded as he stood. His spine straightened, and his face grew calm.

“I’m curious. How did Your Highness see through it?” The dragon treasure ship was real. The imperial guards were real. So where was the flaw?

Just then, a piercing phoenix cry rang out. From the stern of the ship, roaring flames erupted, setting the night ablaze. Duan Chongxuan’s face darkened.

That was Luan Two.

Chapter 59

IN PREHISTORIC TIMES, when humans were slowly exploring cultivation methods and struggling against harsh natural environments and dangerous beasts, the continents were dominated by mythical beasts. These creatures possessed long lifespans; innate, species-specific supernatural abilities; and tough hides, flesh, and bones. By contrast, their minds remained unenlightened. Even after the beasts attained power equivalent to the Great Ascension level, they only had the intellects of human children.

When weak yet intelligent humans learned to cultivate, they also learned how to defeat these beasts and exploit them. The dominant position of mythical beasts was gradually replaced by cultivators, and their numbers dwindled. During the Heavenly Tribulation, entire species perished because they didn't know how to avoid the calamities razing the world. By the Age of Spiritual Decline, when spiritual energy became sparse and living environments changed, only a few mythical beasts survived under the rearing of cultivators.

The four cyan-winged luan birds in the Northern Imperial Palace were such beasts. In eras past, they'd formed a contract with the founding emperor of the Northern Dynasty to protect each successive ruler. Duan Chongxuan was not yet a ruler, and Luan Two was not bound to him by contract. Luan Two was his *friend*. During the good and bad days within the depths of the inner palace, the giant yet gentle luan had always kept the frail child company.

Which was why, at this moment, Duan Chongxuan paid no heed to Wang Xi's question. His attention was solely on the dozens of chains that shot into the night sky.

"Don't worry about me. Run!" he shouted.

The chains were coated in a silver glow, like scattered fragments of starlight. This was because they were engraved with runes and soaked in deadly poison, specifically designed to deal with beasts with tough hides and flesh. Even with the constraints of the contract, humans did not trust

mythical beasts. Hence the many contingency measures to guard against them.

Luan Two heard Duan Chongxuan and rapidly expanded in size, then flapped its wings and took off. The gusting wind knocked over an entire squad of attacking soldiers, who spat blood or tumbled into the water from a strike of its massive talons.

But it was already too late. Men continuously threw themselves into the fray, readily paying a steep price just to divert its attention. The array took shape, and the dozen or so chains tightly coiled around its cyan feathers left charred marks. In pain, Luan Two raised its head and cried out angrily as it was dragged from midair onto the ship. The entire vessel shook violently as if caught in a storm, but it soon steadied.

Luan Two mustered its breath and lit the sky with flames, but the chains around its neck were like a giant throttling hand that forcibly cut off its fire.

Duan Chongxuan lost his composure. “Stop moving!” The Flowlight Chains tightened the more one struggled, inflicting greater harm.

Luan Two heeded its friend and finally gave up. It sprawled on the blood-soaked deck littered with corpses, its eyes blazing crimson. A dozen elite guards did not dare relax for even a moment. They warily gripped the ends of the Flowlight Chains as they surrounded it.

Wang Xi watched the flames dissipate in the night sky. The situation was settled. He no longer cared how Duan Chongxuan had seen through their scheme.

“Your Highness, I know you possess many treasures, even the one-of-a-kind Cloud Shuttle that can tear through space in an instant. Trapping you in an inescapable predicament is a task more difficult than ascending to heaven.”

The Cloud Shuttle could only be used once and by a single person, but it was an unbelievable device capable of saving one’s life in dire straits. Not only that, but Duan Chongxuan also carried the Sky-Piercing Arrow, Sun-Blot Umbrella, Dragoncloud Pills, an inexhaustible amount of fire talismans, and perhaps even more secret and terrifying items in his grasp. Now, none of that mattered. A grin crept across Wang Xi’s face.

“Your Highness must think carefully. You may be able to leave, but *it* cannot.”

How much effort had gone into meticulously crafting such a scheme? At the very least, Wang Xi and the Imperial Guard had spent an entire month lying in wait and concealing their tracks on the Southern Continent. With the situation about to reach its long-desired conclusion, how could he not be excited?

“Since you cannot leave, why not follow me to see the Prince of Xian?” His voice quivered with triumph.

Duan Chongxuan did not speak. He was busy considering many previous events.

He had found it strange before. Why would anyone in the world have been as brazen as Li Lin in his provocations? If someone had instigated it from behind the scenes, it made more sense. Without any token to prove his identity, the simplest method was to summon Luan Two. That was the moment he had stepped into their trap. Certain high-status members of Baopu Sect must have reached some sort of agreement with the Prince of Xian’s faction.

That was not the most frightening part, though. The imperial guards and the dragon treasure ship had not been obtained in one day, to say nothing of the Flowlight Chains and the array designed to subdue a cyan-winged luan. Perhaps even if he had not summoned Luan Two, the other party, capable of such meticulous arrangements, would’ve had another plan ready. How extensive exactly was the Prince of Xian’s influence? Duan Chongxuan couldn’t say. All he knew was that his greatest advantage on this journey had become his greatest vulnerability.

From how confident Wang Xi looked, one thing was certain: His presence here could only mean that his father was gravely ill. Once he understood this, many things no longer mattered. Meeting his imperial uncle was not just the only choice, but the best one.

Then again, was that truly the case?

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GOLDEN LIGHT FILLED THE SKIES of Xingshan Temple, spilling across the verdant spread of mountains as the bloody sun set over the horizon. Two figures stood at the edge of the light, swords in hand, their bodies drenched in blood.

Although Yin Biyue had knowledge of array magic, facing one of this magnitude and withstanding its oppressive aura was an immense challenge, let alone breaking it.

However, Luo Mingchuan might have a way. With the Ghara Pupil Technique, he could discern an opening—maybe.

Luo Mingchuan's eyes were closed. His inner energy surged in waves, his robes billowed, and his face paled by the minute. The sight was alarming. The flesh of his cheeks had sunk in, as if his very life force was draining away at a terrifying speed.

The moment he opened his eyes, an overwhelming force erupted.

Yin Biyue staggered back three steps before he could steady himself. He couldn't stop himself from calling out. "Shixiong…!"

Luo Mingchuan didn't seem to hear him. Without any visible exertion, he vaulted upward like a loosed arrow, straight upward.

Just as he was about to touch the golden light shrouding the sky, he abruptly reversed direction. There was no sword cry, no flash of brilliance, yet power akin to thunder gathered at the tip of his blade. The surrounding air was violently torn apart by the force, and dead leaves and branches exploded into dust that drifted down in a bleak shower.

Then, that terrifying power drove straight into the earth.

Boom!

Rocks and dirt burst outward until dust and debris clouded the air. The ground cracked from the assault, and a fissure raced forward and backward.

Yin Biyue managed to stabilize himself under the sword's momentum. He knew that if the array had a weak spot, this was it. Without

hesitation, he poured every last remnant of his vital qi into Yihu and drove it into the fissure.

The combined force of their strikes was earth-shattering. The fissure expanded like a great mouth, yawning into an abyss. Luo Mingchuan wrenched his sword free and pulled Yin Biyue behind him.

Yin Biyue knew deep down that his sword alone could never have unleashed such power. This could only mean there was something inherently unstable about the dragon vein here.

At the same time, within the temple halls, Jinghai frowned as a trickle of blood escaped the corner of his lips. He rose and flashed forward, arriving at the edge of the abyss in an instant. Overcome with shock and fury, he struck down with his staff.

Luo Mingchuan grasped Yin Biyue's hand—not by the wrist this time, but interlacing their fingers tightly—and leaped into the abyss.

Behind them, the deafening rumble of thunder roared. The Great Golden Light Array shook violently, on the verge of collapse.

Without the channeling of external energy, the abyss rapidly shrank back into a fissure, but it still stretched from the back mountains to the front of the temple, cutting through the innumerable halls. The earth quaked. Rocks and dirt flew as the crack tore forward. It only came to a halt when it reached the mountain gates that declared: *The Sea of Suffering Is Boundless*.

Chaos engulfed Xingshan Temple.

While the main halls remained protected by arrays, the monks' quarters and dining halls, less fortified structures, crumbled into ruins. Gray-robed monks fled in panic amid the billowing dust. Those with weaker cultivation were injured by falling beams and rubble.

Jinghai watched all this with a dazed expression.

Jingyun chanted the Buddha's name. "Amitabha Buddha. Though myriad sins arise, the root lies with the demons."

Even now, they did not consider themselves at fault. To their minds, this calamity was wholly the sin of Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue.

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CRADLED IN LUO MINGCHUAN'S ARMS, Yin Biyue felt as if the quaking earth and clamorous cries belonged to another world.

In the darkness, only the howling wind remained. Luo Mingchuan's familiar warmth made him relax, though he knew this was no time for rest. Unfortunately, his energy was severely spent and his consciousness battered, long past its limits. He could no longer resist the overwhelming dizziness and exhaustion crashing over him like a tide.

Tropes 101 says following the protagonist off a cliff has a 90 percent survival rate, he thought. *Unless the douchebag author is writing a rebirth-revenge story. If* that's *the case, we're gonna have to have a chat with our swords drawn.*

With that, his mind faded.

Chapter 60

THE DAMP, SALTY SEA WIND WAS cold and piercing, and heavy with the pungent scent of blood. Inside the grand ship, thousands of shark-oil lamps blazed like the moon rising over the midnight sea. Under the brilliant light, the blood splatters and mutilated corpses strewn around fell into sharp relief. Chunks of flesh piled together. There were some who still clung to life, but their cries of agony had long faded, leaving only weak moans and pained gasps.

The dragon treasure ship was like hell on earth.

The cyan-winged luan crouched in a pool of blood, restrained by over a dozen chains. The guards gripping the chains showed no expression. After all, they were accustomed to life and death, scenes that were far bloodier and horrifying than this.

Those who'd died or been left in a state worse than death had been mere sacrifices necessary to subdue Luan Two. Duan Chongxuan knew that lighting the lamps now was nothing more than an attempt to shock him with the gruesome display. As a useless crown prince who had spent his childhood sheltered in the inner palace until he was let out to freely roam the Cangya Mountains, he should have been terrified out of his wits, distraught beyond words.

He glanced at Wang Xi, who showed no urgency. Instead, he remained as patient as ever. "Your Highness, have you made your decision?"

He'd known full well that using the Flowlight Chains would drive the luan into a frenzy, causing countless casualties, but he'd cared little for the price his subordinates had to pay. Such cold ruthlessness was indeed fitting for grand ambitions—like rebellion. A vicious dog reflected its master. In Duan Chongxuan's memories, his uncle had always smiled warmly.

He felt a chill deep in his heart.

“I’ll go with you to meet the Prince of Xian,” he said. “First, I must treat Luan Two’s injuries.”

With the matter settled, Wang Xi breathed in relief. “But of course. This way, Your Highness.” After all, the crown prince had too many hidden weapons; he had to be careful. Avoiding a fight was the best outcome.

Wang Xi stepped aside, and the surrounding encirclement parted to make way. The guards holding the chains didn’t move, but they didn’t stop Duan Chongxuan either.

When Luan Two saw him approach, its blazing eyes turned watery, like an aggrieved child on the verge of tears. Duan Chongxuan gently smoothed its feathers, then bent down with a pill in his hand. Luan Two whimpered softly and obediently opened its mouth to swallow it, then nuzzled against his chest.

The imperial guards standing on high alert were amazed that the terrifying beast from moments ago had transformed into this.

Duan Chongxuan patted Luan Two once and turned to leave. It remained docile. Many breathed a sigh of relief.

That didn’t last long.

A blinding bolt of lightning split the night sky. A clear, high-pitched cry followed, like the call of a crane. Amid the roaring wind, Luan Two shrank to half its size and reappeared in the air. In Duan Chongxuan’s hand was a long spear, white smoke coming from the tip. He had just severed the Flowlight Chains around Luan Two’s neck. There had never been any true lightning, only the blur of his spear moving.

The Beacon Fire.

Fenghuo was not a sword but a spear. If the undisputed top weapons in the world today were Chunshan Xiao and Qiufeng Li, both forged from the Linyuan sword, then this spear, which had followed the founding emperor of the Northern Continent through countless battles, deserved a place in the top five.

Duan Chongxuan’s execution of the Beacon Fire barely scratched the surface of the attack’s true essence, but it was enough to sever the Flowlight Chains by virtue of the divine weapon’s inherent might. The moment the

chain around its neck snapped, Luan Two had squirmed free of the remaining restraints.

Duan Chongxuan swung his spear horizontally, so fast it stirred the wind to gather like sea mist beneath its tip. The guards, hesitant to strike with full force due to his status, were caught off guard and forced to retreat.

Wang Xi was the first to react. He lunged forward, shouting orders. “Fire arrows! Form the array!” Archers fired at the luan in the air, their arrow tips bursting into flames as soon as they left the crossbows. Against the dark sea, the trails of fire streaked through the night like a meteor shower. More guards stormed onto the top deck and streamed toward the scene. The nearest soldiers shifted their footwork. They formed row after row to trap Duan Chongxuan within their encirclement.

Duan Chongxuan looked up and shouted, “Run!”

This time, Luan Two didn’t listen. Beating its wings, it dove from the sky and pierced through the roaring barrage of fire.

Wang Xi snatched a crossbow from a guard. His robes billowed as he unleashed the full force of his vital qi and loosed the arrow. The arrowhead tore through the air with a piercing shriek. At the same time, he drew the longsword at his side. Before the blade’s edge flashed, its oppressive aura erupted.

Duan Chongxuan was forced to retreat, but he couldn’t break out of the encirclement. In that moment, he remembered another thing his father once told him: *“Even if you command an army of millions, there will come a time when you must fight alone.”*

He leveled his spear, prepared to meet Wang Xi’s blade head-on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the arrow streaking fiercely through the night. Even if Luan Two flapped its wings with all its might, injured as it was, it wouldn’t be able to dodge.

Suddenly, a gust of wind barreled through, scattering the killing intent and danger into the sea breeze. The sword’s momentum dissipated, and the flames in the sky were snuffed out. Everyone turned toward the source of the wind. A figure stood at the bow of the ship.

They were in the shadows where the lamplight did not touch, but they radiated the aura of a warrior, as sharp as a blade capable of sundering

space itself. Another breeze stirred. The figure jumped in front of Duan Chongxuan. Luan Two descended, exhausted, to crouch by their feet.

Only then did the crowd see clearly that the newcomer was a woman. Clad in ocher-red fighting gear, her black hair drawn into a high ponytail, she emanated a ferocious valor.

Duan Chongxuan stared at the woman in front of him. “Ershijie…” he murmured.

Liu Qishuang tilted back and gave him a curt nod. “Mm.”

Wang Xi’s face paled. Duan Chongxuan revealing this woman’s identity forced him to sheathe his sword.

Few had seen Liu Qishuang in person. She spent most of her time cultivating on Xihua Peak and had no interest in fame, but that didn’t mean she was unknown. On the contrary, after the Battle of Xiling Mountain years ago, the cultivation world wouldn’t dare forget her. Just like Jun Yu back then, she had perfectly demonstrated what it meant for combat prowess to far surpass one’s cultivation level.

Wang Xi signaled the guards to retreat, then bowed respectfully. “Cangya is far away. May I ask what has brought Liu-daoyou here?” His sincerity and etiquette offered the utmost respect. By convention, etiquette demanded she at least exchange a few polite words in return.

Liu Qishuang’s reply was brusque. “To fetch my shidi.”

Wang Xi did not look pleased.

Duan Chongxuan almost laughed. He knew his shijie wasn’t deliberately trying to be rude; she lacked experience in social interactions and didn’t know how to speak tactfully. With her fellow peers, she could manage. With strangers, she came off as cold and aloof.

Wang Xi tried again. “Liu-daoyou, this matter is most important and related to the Northern Emperor’s family affairs. I’m sure you’ve heard rumors of why His Highness went to the Cangya Mountains to study… If you could stand aside, I, Wang Xi, swear here and now that when our great deed is accomplished, the prince will not forget your actions.”

The offer was even more sincere now, a promise in disguise. He really didn’t want to fight her. In the middle of this sprawling sea, with no footing to borrow, Liu Qishuang had somehow crossed the void without any effort and had still arrived with abundant vital qi. With a mere toss of her sleeve, she had dispelled his arrow and sword’s momentum. That alone was enough to make anyone wary.

Duan Chongxuan was the Sword Sage’s disciple, but only because Headmaster-xiansheng had written a letter of recommendation to Xihua Peak. Why had Xiansheng agreed to write it? Because of Duan

Chongxuan's identity. In other words, if he weren't the crown prince—or if Duan Sheng'an died and ceased to be emperor—his status as the Sword Sage's disciple would mean nothing. That was how Wang Xi saw it. Anyone long embroiled in power struggles would think the same. Where great profits lay, so did the hearts of men.

No one on Xihua Peak actually thought this way. In fact, Liu Qishuang had no clue whatsoever who the prince Wang Xi spoke of was. But she said the longest sentence Duan Chongxuan had heard from her in a long time, her expression deadly serious:

"I don't care why he came to Cangya. Since he sincerely considers me his shijie, I will consider him my shidi just as sincerely."

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NIGHT HAD JUST FALLEN in Yunyang City. It was deep autumn, and though Headmaster-xiansheng's attendant cleaned during the day, leaves had piled up on the courtyard grounds.

He sat in the yard without his usual dignified robes and tall hat. Instead, his black hair was tied up with a wooden hairpin, and he wore a simple, unadorned azure robe, giving him an air of casualness.

Wei Jingfeng emerged from the house. Headmaster-xiansheng didn't know how Wei Jingfeng's injuries were healing, but the headmaster maintained his usual calm manner.

"Care for some tea?"

The Sword Sage didn't answer. Instead, he looked at the sky.

The endless night sky above was obscured by courtyard walls and distant towers, fragmented into irregular patches. Nevertheless, the stars still shone brilliantly, peaceful and beautiful. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary—save for Headmaster-xiansheng's deathly pale face.

Above them, the sky shook violently. Fine cracks spread from where Wei Jingfeng's gaze had landed, expanding until they covered his entire

field of vision. Like a glass dome shattering, the illusion broke apart, revealing the true sky. Black as ink, devoid of stars or moon.

Crack.

The illusion's collapse had been soundless. The noise was the teacup slipping from Headmaster-xiansheng's hand to shatter on the ground. A shard grazed the back of his hand, drawing a thin scratch. The blood dripped onto the withered locust leaves. He swayed, his right hand bracing against the stone table.

Wei Jingfeng's eyes were cold.

Confronted with such a gaze, Headmaster-xiansheng tried to explain himself. "No lives will be harmed. He's only being kept in the Pavilion of Quiet Reflection. As for your disciple, nothing will happen to him…"

Wei Jingfeng remained unmoved. "You weren't like this in the past."

Headmaster-xiansheng lowered his eyes and fell silent. He had nothing to add. *'The past,' you say. As if I haven't schemed enough against you over the years,* he thought.

He had persuaded Wei Jingfeng to stay and recover, then isolated the area with an array. Even the sky was fake. Maintaining an array that could deceive a Sage's senses required an enormous price and tremendous expenditure. So much so that the edge of an ordinary broken teacup could slice his skin. All this to ensure the success of Xingshan Temple's endeavor. To remove future calamities.

Wei Jingfeng continued to stare at him.

Headmaster-xiansheng understood what that gaze meant: *Targeting juniors because you cannot defeat the Demon Lord? Utterly shameless.*

A bleak autumn wind rose in the courtyard, sending the piles of dead leaves into flight. When it passed, only one man remained in the yard. As if there had only ever been one.

Slowly, he knelt and gathered the broken porcelain pieces. Where the teacup had shattered was also where the Cosmic Calculation Disk had been destroyed. That, too, had been a gift from Wei Jingfeng, many years ago.

Chapter 61

"SHIXIONG…" WHEN YIN BIYUE regained consciousness, he was startled by their surroundings. It wasn't coal black, but dimly lit with the haze of dawn—enough for him to see the worried brows of the person beside him. "Shixiong, how long have I been asleep?"

Luo Mingchuan carefully helped him sit up and checked his meridians. Yin Biyue didn't resist, letting Luo Mingchuan's vital qi flow into his body while he surveyed the nearby area. They were by a mountain stream. Its damp shores grew lush with grass and the air was thick with the fresh scent of plants. In the faint morning light, the landscape appeared serene and beautiful.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

Luo Mingchuan avoided answering directly. "How do you feel now?"

Yin Biyue circulated his vital qi through his body once. The residual sting of medicine lingered in his meridians. His broken bones were healing, and fortunately, his heart hadn't been injured. His external wounds had been meticulously treated, and even his bloodstained robes had been cleaned.

Yin Biyue could easily imagine how much Luo Mingchuan had done for him while he was unconscious. His shixiong should have been *more* injured, but he'd been taking care of him instead. Yin Biyue grasped Luo Mingchuan's hand, which was still set on his pulse point, and stopped him from transferring more vital qi.

"I'm okay. What about you, Shixiong?"

"I'm fine." After some hesitation, he decided to tell the truth. "I recovered very quickly."

His own recovery frightened him. He had thought that using the Ghara Pupil Technique to unleash power beyond his cultivation level during the battle would result in a severe backlash. Indeed, the moment he shattered the Great Golden Light Array, the immense aura had crushed his meridians. He'd even broken two ribs.

But after falling, he had only been unconscious for a short time before his body began to repair itself.

Such unbelievable regenerative ability was something only demonic cultivators possessed. He spoke the truth calmly, but his heart pounded in his chest. Maybe his shidi would think he was…a demonic cultivator.

Yin Biyue wasn't entirely convinced Luo Mingchuan *had* recovered as much as he thought. Yin Biyue pulled up Luo Mingchuan's right hand and inspected it. His mangled wrist was now smooth and unblemished. Seeing that there wasn't even a scar, Yin Biyue relaxed and smiled.

"Recovering quickly is a good thing. I'm glad you're all right, Shixiong."

He didn't smile often, but when he did, it was like the first thaw of spring. The chill in Luo Mingchuan's heart melted as surely as the snow and ice.

Only when Yin Biyue felt the slight thumping in his chest did he realize he had been leaning in his shixiong's arms.

Oh no, I'm heavy! Poor Shixiong! QAQ

His face burned with embarrassment, and he pushed himself to his feet.

Luo Mingchuan let him go and followed, brushing off his robes. He seemed so composed and upright, Yin Biyue scolded himself for being overly self-conscious. There was nothing awkward about an injured person needing support in the first place.

Yin Biyue shifted his attention to the business at hand. "Shixiong, you saw through the flaw in the array earlier, didn't you? Do you think we're still in the Tixiang Mountains?"

They had fallen into the abyss yet somehow ended up here. It could have been the array's tremendous power distorting space, or perhaps there had always been another world hidden beneath Xingshan Temple.

The two walked along the stream, surveying their surroundings and speculating about their current situation. Luo Mingchuan had already scanned the area with his spiritual sense and found no signs of danger.

“There was something off about the Great Golden Light Array. I noticed an unstable dragon vein beneath it with unusual energy fluctuations different from somewhere else. I only thought to try breaking the array. I didn’t expect to end up here… The types of trees, the humidity in the air, none of it matches the Tixiang Mountains. This is like…another world entirely.”

There was one more thing he didn’t say.

He’d jumped into the abyss without hesitation because he’d sensed a familiar presence, as if something he knew was calling to him. But it was too vague a feeling to take seriously. Mentioning it would only make his shidi worry.

Yin Biyue’s mental strength was exceptional and had recovered to about 60 percent. He could also tell that this place was not the Tixiang Mountains. “Something’s off about the Great Golden Light Array…”

“Yes,” Luo Mingchuan said with a nod. “The maintenance of the Cangya Mountains’ protective array alone costs eighty thousand spirit stones annually. Activating it consumes even more, and it requires either the Cangya Token left by the sect’s founder or the divine weapon Chunshan Xiao to anchor it.”

Yin Biyue understood what he was trying to say. Cangya’s protective array was already so costly; how much more could it cost for Xingshan Temple to sustain a miraculous array from the Age of Sages for millions of years? The expense was unimaginable. Even if the temple had its own resources and heritage, it was far from enough to meet the demands.

Yin Biyue focused and examined their surroundings carefully. Finally, he realized what was wrong. There was the sound of wind and water, the rustling of mountain pines, but no signs of living creatures. No birds in the trees, no fish in the water, no insects in the grass. The climate was pleasant, the land fertile, but aside from him and Luo Mingchuan, there were no traces of life. The sky was bright as day, yet there was no sun in sight. The once serene and beautiful landscape now seemed lifeless.

This was a dead land.

Yin Biyue felt a chill. “Maybe the Great Golden Light Array wasn’t sustained by spirit stones or divine weapons, but by some kind of life

force…”

The speculation was so absurd that he couldn’t even finish the sentence. Luo Mingchuan didn’t respond, but he had similar suspicions. The two fell silent and warily walked toward the depths of the forest.

There, hidden behind the dense branches, they glimpsed a structure made of magnificent yellow tiles. It was the only building in this whole forest. Once they approached, they managed to make out the large, peeling characters inscribed on the faded-vermilion plaque above the entrance: *Great Hero Hall*. Despite the word “hall,” it wasn’t large. More like a shrine.

From what they had seen so far, they felt certain this place was not an illusion. The shrine before them was identical in appearance to Xingshan Temple, meaning that this place down in the abyss was indeed another world connected to the mountains at the temple’s back.

The shrine stood alone in the wilderness, covered in years of dust. Its doors were locked, its wooden doors and windows so worn their age was indiscernible. It seemed as though a gust of wind could topple it, but upon their approach, even the wind fell silent.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan exchanged a look.

Cultivators didn’t just have sharper senses than ordinary people. As their cultivation advanced and their souls grew stronger, their intuition also became more accurate. Right now, both of them felt that the questionable part of the Great Golden Light Array might be held within this shrine.

They didn’t enter recklessly. They released their spiritual senses first to inspect it—and found nothing unusual. Yin Biyue pushed the door open with the tip of his scabbard. The stone lock fell with a clatter, raising a cloud of dust where it landed.

Inside, the shrine was dimly lit, its apricot-yellow curtains thick with incense ash. There were no spiderwebs. The beams were weathered, but the interlocking structure remained solid. The primary beams were two overlapping six-rafter beams, layered with four-rafter beams and purlins in a gradually decreasing pattern as the level rose. Such intricate craftsmanship had been long since simplified and phased out; not even Xingshan Temple had it anymore. During the Age of Sages, however, it had

been the standard building method for Buddhist temples and other structures.

The altar at the center was tall, but the Buddha statue atop it wasn't large. Its eyes were half lidded, and it was seated in the full lotus position. Its left hand rested on its knee, while its right hand was raised in the teaching mudra—the index finger and thumb curled to form a circle. It had been gilded, but the paint had flaked off over time, revealing the dark brown wood beneath, giving the compassionate idol a twisted visage.

Luo Mingchuan stepped into the shrine, ahead of Yin Biyue to protect him, when a sudden wave of dizziness struck. He turned, wanting to say *Don't come in*, but then his body collapsed backward without warning.

Seeing Luo Mingchuan's stricken expression, Yin Biyue rushed forward to catch him, concern overshadowing caution. The moment Yin Biyue stepped into the shrine, his vision went black. The last thing he saw was the half-lidded eyes of the Buddha statue.

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LUO MINGCHUAN STOOD at the edge of a cliff, still dazed. He remembered he and his shidi were at Xingshan Temple, but somehow…

"Demon!" A sharp voice barked like the clap of thunder.

His head felt heavy, and every inch of his body ached. The shout jolted him awake, and he looked down to see himself covered in blood.

The wind at the precipice was so strong it felt like it could blow him over. For some reason, he knew that below him lay Yunxing Abyss.

The Yin Biyue before Luo Mingchuan seemed to have grown up overnight. The white hair that worried him was gone. His shidi's cascading black locks and white robes whipped in the wind. His hand gripping his sword was slender and fair as jade. He was holding Yihu, as always, but the tip was pointed at Luo Mingchuan. Blood dripped from the blade.

Behind Yin Biyue stood many people. Among them were cyan-robed Baopu Sect elders and monks in yellow kasaya, and further back were

others from every sect he knew of. None of them reacted. They merely watched coldly from the sidelines.

Luo Mingchuan lifted his eyes to stare straight at the unfamiliar man in front of him. He found that every word he spoke was a struggle. “Shidi, you believe them? You want to kill me?”

His greatest fear, the thing he least wanted to face, had happened after all.

Yin Biyue’s icy expression flickered for the first time. He arched a brow. “My wanting to kill you has nothing to do with anyone else. It is time to settle what’s between you and me.”

Luo Mingchuan was dazed. The youth in his memories had stood just like this, sword in hand, and he had possessed such conviction. *“If I must believe in something, I believe in my shixiong.”*

That had been just yesterday, but it felt as distant as a lifetime ago. It almost seemed like a dream.

Yesterday, it was ‘we.’ Today, it’s ‘you and me.’

The sword drove into his heart, but it didn’t hurt as much as he expected. The spray of blood cleared his mind instead. He could feel life leaving his body. The blade pierced through his body and jutted an inch from his back, bringing them close to each other. Luo Mingchuan stared squarely into Yin Biyue’s eyes, then smiled.

“I don’t know who you are, but you are not my shidi. Shidi would never look at me like this.”

What wounded him wasn’t the sword, but the icy gaze.

Yihu’s bearer said nothing. With cold indifference, he kicked Luo Mingchuan into the Yunxing Abyss.

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YIN BIYUE’S HEAD SPUN.

He opened his eyes. Amid the crisscross of light and shadow, he saw his own pallid reflection in the glass tiles beneath him. Only then did he realize he was kneeling. The cold traveled from his knees to his entire body. He tried to stand, but his shoulders felt weighed down by a mountain. Straightening his back was the most he could manage.

He lifted his eyes and saw an enormous hall lined with twelve bronze lampstands. The candlelight flickered but gave off no warmth. At the far end of the room was a towering platform bearing a throne. He could tell someone was seated there, but their face was obscured by shadows, and he couldn't see their expression clearly.

The person spoke, their voice low yet ethereal and rich as it echoed through the empty hall.

"Have you made your decision?"

Yin Biyue froze. He felt certain he knew the man on the throne.

The man rose and descended the steps. Layer upon layer of robes trailed behind him like rolling night tides. Terrifyingly, the intricate array runes on the expansive sleeves looked almost alive under the dancing flames. In only a few steps, he'd crossed the vast hall and stood before Yin Biyue.

Yin Biyue finally understood why he felt familiar.

This man was Luo Mingchuan.

But anyone who had met Luo Mingchuan would never mistake the two. Their faces were similar enough, yes, but this one carried a subtle wickedness. Illuminated by the flickering candlelight, he looked like a demon from the abyss. Yin Biyue opened his mouth but found he couldn't speak.

Cold fingertips lifted his chin, sending a piercing chill through his entire body. He was forced to tilt his head and meet the man's inky eyes. They reflected the candlelight. Gazing into them was like staring at a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood.

The man leaned in. Frigid breath brushed against Yin Biyue's neck, carrying a faint hiss of what sounded like delight. "In the past, the Buddha

cut his own flesh to feed an eagle. Now, we have Sect Leader Yin offering to feed a demon with his own body. Is that not a fine tale for the ages?”

The position made Yin Biyue unbearably uncomfortable, but he couldn’t break free of the invisible restraints. He could only listen as the man continued.

“Spend one night with me in Changyuan Hall, and tomorrow morning, I’ll withdraw my forces by three thousand miles. How about it?”

Even without his knowing the context, Yin Biyue’s gut told him this was nothing good. He looked at those eyes devoid of human emotion and filled only with desire.

“You’re not Shixiong,” he said with conviction. “He would never say something like that.”

Even if you have a similar face, you are not him.

Chapter 62

LUO MINGCHUAN HAD fallen off a cliff, plunging into the Yunxing Abyss that none ever returned from. By all logic, he should be dead. Everything had felt too real to be a dream—the excruciating pain in his heart, the loss of blood, his stiffening limbs, the biting wind. People said the Yunxing Abyss was a place where light could not touch, a warning the universe had left humankind after the Heavenly Tribulation. Only those standing at the pinnacle of the world could have an idea of what truly lay inside it.

Gradually, he realized he was still conscious. He just couldn't feel pain anymore. His soul had not dispersed; it remained within him. Yet he watched like an outsider looking in as wisps of deadly energy coalesced in the darkness of the abyss and began to devour his corpse. There were creatures in the abyss born of the fiendish shadows, demonic beings that fed on flesh and blood.

His lifeless body opened its eyes again. His eyes were pitch-black, like the depths of the Yunxing Abyss itself, devoid of any human emotion. Luo Mingchuan felt a chill. Instinct told him that what was about to come next was something he did not want to see.

Sure enough, his body stood up. Then it opened its mouth and ate those creatures. It devoured unceasingly, its expression shifting from indifference to satisfaction, as though it had starved for thousands of years and finally found a meal to its liking. His body was no longer human.

He walked through the abyss, surrounded by an ever-growing horde of demonic beings, some of which gained sentience and began to prostrate themselves at his feet. Once sated, he bestowed his excess power upon them.

There was no day or night in the abyss. He had no idea how much time passed. Eventually, with a mere gesture, he summoned a gale, rode the wind upward, and brought with him his countless demonic followers.

At the cliff's edge waited tens of thousands of demonic cultivators. The sunset was the color of blood, spilling crimson across the myriad banners fluttering in the westerly wind. The sea of figures stretched on and on into the distance.

He stood before them all. The sun and the stars hid their brilliance, the hills concealed their shapes—and all Twelve Palaces of the Demonic Dominion fell before him in submission. Like a tide, the crowd knelt in waves, parting to form a grand path for him. Their voices shook the heavens:

"We welcome the return of Your Grace!"

It hit Luo Mingchuan that the most terrifying thing wasn't that his shidi didn't believe him. It was that he had been a demon from the beginning.

A monster that gnashed its teeth and drank blood, that slaughtered without remorse. One who would bring ruin and sin to the world. Despair consumed him.

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WHEN HE OPENED HIS EYES AGAIN, he was opposite a massive mirror. It reflected his pale face, but his features were sharper, his expression arrogant and cold. The full sleeves of his black robes draped down, embroidered with intricate golden runes. Just standing there, he radiated a contradictory brilliance, one that spoke of darkness.

Luo Mingchuan calmed down. "You are not me," he said to his reflection.

The man in the mirror spoke with a dark voice. "How am I not?"

"I am not the Demon Lord."

"Who would believe you?"

"Shidi would."

The man in the mirror laughed. “He doesn’t. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have tried to kill you. Think carefully. In the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament, why did he set up the Crimson Omen killing array?”

“It was a misunderstanding. He was misled. His deep obsession caused him to lose his way… It was my fault to begin with.”

“Ridiculous. You think the truth you extracted with the Ghara Pupil Technique was real? He shouldn’t have even known you possessed it. So why wasn’t he the least bit surprised when you used it in Xingshan Temple’s halls?.”

That was true. He had never told Yin Biyue. The technique was somewhat unorthodox, after all. Even during the Flower-Plucking Tournament, he had used it without others knowing. In the temple was the first time he had unleashed it in front of his shidi.

Yet Yin Biyue had immediately shouted, “Nonsense! The Ghara Pupil Technique is *your* temple’s magic!”

That shouldn’t have happened.

The man in the mirror laughed again, his voice a seductive whisper. “You still don’t know, do you? That night of the academy’s graduation, nothing actually happened. If you don’t believe me, I can send you back to see for yourself… It’s just that your shidi knows an even more powerful method of mind manipulation, one that makes you believe you’ve wronged him.”

It was Luo Mingchuan’s turn to laugh. He realized he was being led astray by this man’s words. How absurd. He gripped the Chenzhou sword, and his mind cleared.

Seeing him draw his sword, the man in the mirror scoffed. “You think you can kill me—”

Before he could finish, Luo Mingchuan thrust the blade through his own heart. Hot blood gushed from the wound.

“You have no right to speak of my shidi.”

Crack!

The mirror shattered. The Buddhist shrine reappeared.

***

WHEN THE WORLD STARTED to spin around Yin Biyue, he thought it was because he could finally move. However, he quickly became aware that wasn't the case at all. He was being carried bridal style from the great hall to the inner chamber. The candlelight flickered over the man's face along the way, casting shadows beneath his long lashes. His icy body temperature seemed to seep into Yin Biyue's bones. It was a constant reminder that despite their similar faces, this man was not Luo Mingchuan.

His shixiong's embrace was always warm. Whether holding him drunk at night or supporting him under the blazing sun, he was as warm and gentle as a spring afternoon.

The inner chamber was laden with layers of silk gauze drapes. A censer emitted faint smoke that swirled in the air. If this was a dream, it was far too real. An infinite fear gripped Yin Biyue. What if he had died in the shrine and transmigrated again—into a world without his shixiong?

The jadeite bed behind the curtains was cold and hard, but the man's movements were gentle. He lay Yin Biyue down as though handling a fragile treasure.

Even so, the man sensed the resistance of the person in his arms. He chuckled softly. "You don't want this?"

The voice was too familiar. Yin Biyue looked up abruptly and met a pair of warm amber eyes, clear and gentle like a tranquil lake.

"Shixiong…" He called out without thinking.

As soon as he'd spoken, the man's smile twisted strangely. His eyes darkened back to black as he arched a brow and laughed outright. "Shixiong? Ha, Sect Leader Yin, you're too funny."

He leaned close to Yin Biyue's ear, his tone tender yet laced with cruel malice.

"Your shixiong is already dead. You killed him with your own hands. Don't you remember? At the precipice of the Yunxing Abyss—one clean

stab through the heart. So precise, so steady. I admire that."

Yin Biyue's eyes widened in shock. "I killed…Shixiong?"

Then, just as suddenly, he relaxed.

This wasn't a new world. Maybe it was just an illusion inside the shrine.

The other man was still talking, but Yin Biyue no longer heard him. A thought struck him. He drew his sword—blood sprayed.

His final words were: "Whether this is a dream or an illusion, I could never be the one who kills Shixiong."

***

HE OPENED HIS EYES to the decaying ancient beams above. Turning his head, he found Luo Mingchuan lying beside him.

Luo Mingchuan's eyes fluttered open at the same time to stare back at Yin Biyue. After the despair and suffering Luo Mingchuan had just endured, meeting Yin Biyue's eyes carried the tremendous happiness that came with surviving a disaster.

Luo Mingchuan let out a muffled grunt, which was how Yin Biyue became aware of what he'd done. He had just wanted to hug his shixiong, but their height difference made it more like he'd pounced into Luo Mingchuan's arms.

How…utterly rude! He must have lost his mind!

He scrambled to get up but couldn't stand, because this time, Luo Mingchuan didn't let go. Instead, he hugged back hard. The familiar scent and warmth enveloped Yin Biyue without mercy.

Maybe…maybe Shixiong also went through something painful, he thought. He reached out and gently patted Luo Mingchuan's back.

This gesture, like someone comforting a child, made Luo Mingchuan both amused and perplexed, dispelling any other thoughts he might have harbored. He smiled and patted his innocent shidi in return.

Moments later, they grew alert again and stood to reassess the shrine. It looked exactly as before, but the absence of peculiarities was the biggest oddity. They remained where they were, channeling their vital qi to the max, and didn't take another step.

"Shixiong, what did you see earlier?"

"It doesn't matter. Now that I'm awake, I know it was all false. Shidi, no matter what you saw, you must believe that we will never turn against each other."

A glaring jinx flag instantly planted itself in Yin Biyue's head. *Don't you know anything?! Based on my years of experience as human set dressing, having seen it all—if we don't clarify things now, something terrible's DEF gonna happen! How many main couples have suffered tragic Bad Endings because of one measly misunderstanding? How many bros turned into mortal enemies because they assumed there was nothing to explain?!*

Tell me—what's the key ingredient to a happy life? That's right: Speak! Set. Things. Straight!

Important things needed to be spelled out. Even repeating it three times isn't enough!

He grew serious. "Shixiong, if we genuinely trust each other, enough not to doubt one another over illusions, then we should say things outright. Sharing information now will prevent misunderstandings in the future."

Luo Mingchuan gazed into Yin Biyue's clear eyes and realized that, in this matter, his shidi was far wiser than he. "You're right."

To run away and to forget were not the best solutions. Thus, he recounted the illusion he experienced. Yin Biyue listened with a grave expression.

"I knew without a doubt that the person who stabbed me wasn't you, so I wasn't upset," Luo Mingchuan reassured him. "But if there really *are* demonic creatures in the Yunxing Abyss…"

Yin Biyue understood.

Neither of them knew what lay in the abyss. Illusions that deceived the mind couldn't fabricate things from nothing—they were projections of

one’s deepest fears. If something appeared that defied their knowledge, like the existence of demonic creatures, then it might not be an illusion after all, but a glimpse into the future.

A future where I kill Luo Mingchuan? Impossible.

“Shixiong, I also saw someone who looked like you,” Yin Biyue admitted, then he recounted the rest. “He said I killed you. But we both know that can’t be true, and neither of us looks quite the way we did in the dream. Fate may have already changed.”

“Yes. If it was an illusion, then it was false. If it was fate, then we’ll change it.” After talking it out, Luo Mingchuan felt as though a weight had lifted from his chest. His shidi’s words reassured him further. The dark clouds over them dispersed, leaving only relief.

Just like when he had pulled his shidi into the abyss at Xingshan Temple, that fleeting sense of familiarity surged through him again.

Luo Mingchuan’s gaze fell on the Buddha statue directly ahead. His eyes turned black, and the full force of the Ghara Pupil Technique was unleashed.

The gaze was intangible, yet at that moment, Yin Biyue felt a tremendous oppressive might. If those eyes were turned on him, the crushing force would make every bone in his body scream in agony. But the Buddha statue was an object. How could it feel pain?

To his astonishment, the worn, dust-covered statue began to transform. The remnants of its gilded paint flaked away, revealing the original black-brown material beneath. Then, from its eyelids to its fingertips, every inch of its body cracked apart.

Amid the clouds of dust, the Buddha statue opened its eyes.

No, not a Buddha, but a desiccated monk. His kasaya was faded, yet his expression remained solemn and dignified.

Chapter 63

THE SCENE WAS TOO CREEPY for words. No one would think that a dust-sealed Buddha statue, untouched for a million years, would conceal such secrets. Not to mention, the monk was somehow still alive.

Shocked, Yin Biyue gripped Yihu but did not unsheathe it. Luo Mingchuan was calm, and that calmness influenced him as well. No matter how terrifying the situation ahead might be, they would fight together and overcome the danger.

The monk was wizened, his cheeks deeply sunken, and the fingers protruding from his kasaya were shriveled into brown lumps. Yin Biyue couldn't even tell if he was a human or a ghost. Luo Mingchuan's eyes returned to their normal color as he took a step forward, subtly shielding Yin Biyue from the monk before them.

When the monk fully opened his eyes, a clear breeze swept into the shrine. It brushed away eons of dust and the space brightened. He sat amid this soft glow, gazing peacefully at the two outsiders. Yin Biyue didn't know how to describe those eyes. They were neither the cold, omniscient gaze of a deity upon a high altar nor the eyes of a demon used to overlooking rivers of blood. They were compassionate and solemn, as though capable of relieving all the suffering and pain in the mortal world. They were the eyes of a Buddha. Indeed, he was more like a true Buddha than any of the statues enshrined in Xingshan Temple.

As the wind left the shrine, the wooden door that had been pushed open earlier gently closed on its own. The stone lock clicked back into place. Yin Biyue was oblivious to all that, mesmerized by the old monk's gaze.

"*Break!*" Luo Mingchuan cried out.

Yin Biyue snapped out of it, and cold sweat drenched his clothes at once. He hadn't expected that even with his powerful soul, he could still be ensnared by a mere gaze. He'd been careless.

When he looked again, there was no radiance or true Buddha. The shrine was still the same old shrine. The monk's eyes were once again clouded and dull, but his strength was unimaginable.

Yin Biyue also noticed that the monk's kasaya was overly loose, indicating he hadn't always been this emaciated. It was as though something was draining his life force.

The old monk wasn't disturbed by having his trance magic broken. Instead, a faint smile graced his lips. "Where have you two come from?"

His voice was raw and rough from disuse, and he spoke slowly, but his tone was natural and warm, like an elder chatting with familiar juniors. It made it difficult to stay guarded.

Luo Mingchuan didn't relax. "From the temple."

"Is the temple well?"

"No."

If the question referred to the temple's hospitality, that certainly wasn't well. If it referred to the temple's condition—the grand array damaged and the dragon vein collapsed—it also wasn't.

For some reason, the old monk laughed contentedly, as though his wish had been fulfilled. "Good."

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan had assumed this person was a powerful senior from Xingshan Temple. Judging by his reaction, he seemed more like the temple's enemy.

"I've answered two of your questions, sir," Luo Mingchuan said. "May I ask who you are?"

"This humble monk is called Liaoguan." His tone was even, as if stating an ordinary Dharma name.

Yin Biyue had been waiting tensely for the answer, but his pupils contracted. He wondered if he had misheard, or if this was just a coincidental shared name. He stared at the monk in disbelief. Even Luo Mingchuan was visibly shocked. The monk said nothing further, as if waiting for their questions.

Had the two not studied ancient texts extensively at the academy, they would never have recognized his name. A million years had passed. Even the names of the Demon Lord and the True Immortal had been nearly forgotten by the world. If they were barely remembered, who would recall a Sage who left no legacy? Master Liaoguan—the master of all cultivation methods, reputed to have shattered the boundaries between Buddhist, martial, and spiritual cultivation. After the Great Dao-Demon War, he was never heard from again. Too much information in the ancient past could not be verified, and later generations could only assume that he'd also perished in the war.

"Why are you here, sir?" Luo Mingchuan asked. After learning of the man's unbelievable identity, he ought to have addressed the monk as "Master Liaoguan." However, the experience at Xingshan Temple had made it difficult to trust revered monks. Luo Mingchuan hesitated to adopt the demeanor of a respectful junior. Yin Biyue felt the same and made no move to approach with a bow either.

Liaoguan's smile never faded. "I've always been here. Now that you've come, I had to see you, naturally."

This was directed at Luo Mingchuan.

It wasn't really a good time, but Yin Biyue's mind jumped to the level-up power fantasy cliche of a protagonist surviving a cliff fall and meeting a hidden master who'd impart sixty years of cultivation unto him, thus granting him an OP hack to dominate the world. That trope worked basically anywhere! Then again, in this world, past experience told Yin Biyue such things wouldn't be so simple.

"You and I have never met, sir," Luo Mingchuan said doubtfully.

Liaoguan shook his head. "Come, have a seat. Let's talk. It's been so long since anyone spoke with me…" He seemed somewhat lonely.

The two turned to see two chairs materialize out of thin air behind them. They hadn't sensed the slightest ripple of vital qi. The monk's cultivation was unfathomable, yet he showed no hostility. Besides, both of them had many questions, so they obligingly took their seats.

"Some things, if left unsaid, will be forgotten with time… How long has it been since the Heavenly Tribulation?" Liaoguan asked.

“Over six hundred thousand years,” Luo Mingchuan answered.

“Heh… How time passes.” Liaoguan sighed. “When I was out in the world, it was naught but chaos. I imagine it’s better now.” He turned to Luo Mingchuan. “The Ghara Pupil Technique you practice comes from something I wrote while crossing the Cang River one night. It was rushed. Have you encountered any difficulties?”

At this moment, Liaoguan seemed less like a once-revered Sage and more like an elderly man who wanted to share his past with the young.

“None,” Luo Mingchuan answered, “but I have questions. The monks in Xingshan Temple also practice it. Is my version different from theirs?”

Yin Biyue remembered how, in the temple hall, Jinghai had claimed his shixiong practiced the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.

Liaoguan chuckled. “Of course it is. Yours is orthodox. Theirs are heretical. I only wrote one scroll on the Ghara Pupil Technique, then casually handed it to a fisherman on the river. What the temple has are merely flawed copies. Not only do they lack the true essence, but the cultivation method is also incomplete.”

Luo Mingchuan had already guessed that the sole authentic scroll might have ended up in the academy’s library, where he’d found it, but he still had doubts. Before he could ask, Liaoguan continued.

“After you finished reading it, did the book spontaneously combust into ashes?”

Luo Mingchuan nodded.

“Yes, that is the right one. The true scroll was enchanted. If the reader’s aptitude is insufficient, it shows an incomplete version. If the aptitude is sufficient, it self-destructs after reading.” Liaoguan looked pleased with himself. “One inheritor of my legacy is enough.”

Yin Biyue was privately stunned. That such a mystical and unpredictable method was able to endure for a million years spoke volumes of the monk’s profound cultivation. Why would someone of his stature remain here for so many years?

Liaoguan looked at him and smiled. “Dear boy, I know what you’re thinking. My staying here wasn’t by choice. I was trapped.”

At this, both their expressions changed. Who in the world could trap a Sage? The Demon Lord?

Like an old man happy to reminisce, Liaoguan recounted his tale: “During the great Dao-Demon War, I led the disciples of Xingshan Temple to hold off three thousand demonic warriors, just so Yi Lingxiao could kill Mo Changyuan. In the end, Mo Changyuan died under the Linyuan sword. But Yi Lingxiao was also gravely wounded, his lifespan nearly exhausted…”

These names sounded unfamiliar, but they were the True Immortal and Demon Lord’s true names.

“When the war ended, the land was razed, everything in ruins. My shidi, Liaowang, was in seclusion during the conflict and did not participate. He was at the peak of his strength. As I was injured, I was no match for him.

“Xingshan Temple suffered heavy losses and couldn’t sustain its grand array. For the sake of its ten-thousand-year legacy, Liaowang set up the Dragonbound Array, imprisoning me here to feed it.” He focused on Luo Mingchuan once more. “If not for my inheritor arriving today and seeing through the flaw in the array, I might never have awoken again. Perhaps in a few more years, I would’ve been spent and mummified in this spot.”

Yin Biyue was stunned for a long time. He hadn’t expected his earlier speculation to be true. Then the Great Golden Light Array wasn’t sustained by spirit stones or divine weapons. It was draining the life and cultivation of a Sage. What kind of horrifying, cruel magic was this? A major figure from the Great Dao-Demon War hadn’t died on the battlefield. Instead, he was slowly wasting away in an imprisonment array, unknown to all.

“What can we do for you?” Luo Mingchuan asked. “Is there a way to break the array?”

“I am the array’s core and anchor, bound to it in life and death,” Liaoguan replied calmly. “After so long, I have no attachments left in this world. Being in here or out there makes no difference. I only have one final wish.”

“Please speak, sir,” Luo Mingchuan said.

Liaoguan smiled, like an elder looking at a beloved disciple.

“The Ghara Pupil Technique was written in haste, so it inevitably has flaws. Now, confined by the array, I cannot leave this altar. Will you come closer, so I may impart its final stage to you?”

This really was the kind of OP cheat reserved for protagonists! A Sage’s personal instruction was an incredible boon, and it had just fallen out of nowhere into Luo Mingchuan’s lap. Nevertheless, Yin Biyue suspected something wasn’t right about this.

As Luo Mingchuan stood and stepped forward, Yin Biyue rose to pull him back. Before his fingers touched Luo Mingchuan’s sleeve, his shixiong stopped and turned, flashing him a reassuring smile.

“Your words are moving, sir,” he said to Liaoguan. “But I don’t believe you.”

Yin Biyue’s discomfort spiked. After the encirclement at Xingshan Temple, meeting someone else imprisoned by the temple in the name of the greater good evoked sympathy. Moreover, Liaoguan did not put on the aloof air of a Sage, appearing kind, friendly, and impassive—everything that discouraged doubt.

Just like the shrine itself, the absence of peculiarities was the greatest oddity. The Sage’s story being flawless was its greatest flaw.

“And why is that?” Liaoguan asked.

“The sixteenth abbot of Xingshan Temple, Master Liaowang, never reached higher than the Great Ascension level. Even if you were weakened, how could he have injured you?” He let the words hang there for a moment. “Legends say you shattered the barriers between spiritual, martial, and Buddhist cultivation, mastering all methods… It wouldn’t be far-fetched to say you also mastered demonic methods.”

Liaoguan’s expression fell into shadow, and the old shrine grew gloomier. The light filtering through the window lattices cast bars across his body, making him look sinister and terrifying. He laughed loudly, his voice hoarse and gleeful.

“Ha ha ha! Just so!”

Yin Biyue stood frozen. The gut feeling he hadn't wanted to acknowledge was confirmed: Liaoguan *had* broken the barriers of demonic cultivation. The Ghara Pupil Technique really was related to the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.

Surely his shixiong would be the most devastated. His lifelong adherence to orthodox Daoism shattered, how could he accept that he'd been practicing demonic arts all this time?

Yin Biyue turned to look at Luo Mingchuan in a panic, only to find him calm, emotionless.

Perhaps some people instinctively clung to comforting lies and would have wanted to believe Liaoguan's earlier words. Luo Mingchuan was too rational for that. He had long suspected the Ghara Pupil Technique, because after practicing it, he felt like the barriers blocking all other magic had broken down. He'd encountered no bottlenecks no matter what he'd cultivated.

"At your peak, sir, you were nearly omnipotent. Why turn to demonic cultivation?" It was all Luo Mingchuan could ask.

Liaoguan's voice reverberated, as if exhaling a breath of turbid air suppressed for a million years. Even his sunken cheeks flushed with excitement. "Sages and True Immortals still face the end of their lifespans. How is that omnipotence? Daoism only seeks the origin of the universe's laws; Buddhism only cultivates the next life. What I wanted was eternity—a method to coexist with the heavens!

"Good and evil exist within humans, but cultivation is not inherently so. It's laughable that even someone like Yi Lingxiao couldn't see past this delusion! Mo Changyuan and I studied the *Heavenly Net Canon* together, creating the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net. The Ghara Pupil Technique is the first revolution! Who would've thought I'd reach the eighth revolution but stall there, while Mo Changyuan was one step from the ninth only to die under the Linyuan sword…"

At this, Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan both paled.

They'd thought Liaoguan had merely dabbled in demonic arts in secret. Now it seemed he had colluded with the Demon Lord. In that case,

his role in the Great War was likely on the demonic side, and the one who had gravely injured him had been the True Immortal, Yi Lingxiao.

“It’s true that cultivation is not inherently good or evil,” Yin Biyue said, “but have you truly never committed any evil deeds?”

Liaoguan laughed. “What is evil? Killing one man is a crime—but killing thousands is heroism!”

The shrine shook violently as his voice rose. The ancient beams trembled, and dust rained down. The monk’s kasaya billowed as his energy surged. The altar beneath him erupted in a storm of dust. Golden light burst from behind him, its edges tinged with crimson. Amid the cracking of bones, his body suddenly grew in size.

Chapter 64

LIAOGUAN, WHO HAD TURNED from Buddhism to the demonic arts long ago, dared to defy the greatest taboo under heaven and had paid a steep price to single-mindedly pursue immortality. A man like him, as long as he had even one breath left, would never impart his cultivation to anyone.

Luo Mingchuan was already on guard. With a swift draw of his sword, he struck forward while tugging Yin Biyue into a rapid retreat!

The sword's momentum split through the dust, cleaving a deep fissure into the gray brick wall of the shrine that stretched all the way to the foot of the altar. It stopped just an inch before Liaoguan, but the golden light had already enveloped the entire hall, and a tidal wave of his powerful aura surged toward them. The frail wooden door, now as unyielding as forged metal, forcefully threw the two back toward Liaoguan and forced them to face the crushing pressure head-on.

Upon the altar, the old monk's eyes were tightly shut, his brow wrinkled. The golden and crimson light behind him grew ever more blinding.

That was why he'd been willing to explain so much earlier. He'd been buying himself time to recover. Now, every passing second only worsened their predicament.

The two exchanged a look. Luo Mingchuan was the first to raise his sword momentum again, pouring all his vital qi into the attack. A sharp crackling sound burst from his blade, as if the very air were being torn apart. He carved a path through the suffocating pressure, just as Yihu left its sheath and charged forward down the opened path.

A biting chill spilled from the blade, frosting the ground with a thin layer of white. Where the sword passed, the ice spread rapidly. Its edge slashed straight toward Liaoguan. Luo Mingchuan's gaze locked onto Liaoguan's brow.

This was the third time the pair had fought side by side. Back in the cave when they encountered the demonic cultivator, their coordination was clumsy. By Xingshan Temple, they had a decent grasp of one another's movements. Here, they flowed seamlessly together, a perfect complement of one another, unleashing power far beyond their levels. Their strength could shake the entire cultivation world.

None of it was enough to defeat a former Sage, even one weakened by time and magic.

When Liaoguan opened his eyes, Yin Biyue's sword froze in midair, unable to advance another millimeter. His lips pressed into a line, and cold sweat beaded on his forehead. Liaoguan's gaze fell on the blade, and Yin Biyue paled. He staggered back three steps before he stopped himself.

But that single glance at Yihu sent piercing pain through Liaoguan's eyes, enough to force them shut for an instant. In that fleeting moment, Luo Mingchuan lunged forward. His left hand clapped Yin Biyue's back, while his right flashed out a Great Buddhist Mudra that slammed down with crushing force.

Yin Biyue had been thrown from the battle by his own shixiong, and could only watch as the two clashed with violent palm strikes.

The shrine quaked violently amid the golden light. Its drapes exploded into pieces, then its beams splintered into wooden shrapnel. Luo Mingchuan's right hand was mangled; flesh and blood sprayed like mist, revealing stark white bone. Liaoguan's wizened hand recoiled almost imperceptibly. Beneath him, the altar cracked under their thrashing vital qi, splitting into five deep gashes.

By then, Yin Biyue's sword momentum was fully formed. A brilliant Broad Daylight sword glare brightened the entire shrine.

Boom!

The altar shattered into dust, and Liaoguan collapsed into the debris. Filth smeared his face, his golden light dimmed under the grime. This time, he saw the sword clearly. His pupils contracted.

Yin Biyue hadn't expected that, in his rage at the sight of Luo Mingchuan's injury, his fury-fueled strike would be that powerful.

Yihu grew stronger against strong foes, creating awe and confusion. At the Flower-Plucking Tournament, it had rivaled the Fengyu sword. At Xingshan Temple, it had pierced Jingyun's indestructible Dharma body. Just now, it breached the defense of a Sage.

Liaoguan slowly rose to his feet, his bones cracking and grinding sharply. Despite his small, desiccated form, his presence loomed before them like a mountain. His expression was impassive. At first, he felt he ought to say something to the sword he'd not seen in so many years. Upon reflection, he found there was nothing to say. The blade remained as detestable as ever with its new master. Anger erupted in his chest, roaring like a bonfire. What did it matter if a million years had passed? Even if all eternity passed by, the sight of that sword would still ignite his rage! His hatred!

He reached out and clamped the blade between his fingers.

In Yin Biyue's eyes, the old monk's movement was agonizingly slow—yet impossible to evade. The pressure skyrocketed, trapping him between advance and retreat, as if an entire mountain range now weighed upon his sword. Yihu thrummed violently, crying out like a storm. Terror gripped him. Liaoguan meant to snap the sword in half.

A deathly chill crept up the blade, seizing his wrist before ravaging through his meridians and surging toward his heart.

Then, a gust of wind passed, and another sword swept in from the side.

Yin Biyue turned to see Luo Mingchuan wielding Chenzhou with his left hand with a calm look in his eyes. Half his right sleeve was soaked in crimson, as his other hand dripped steadily. The strike was impeccably executed. It pried Yihu free from Liaoguan's grip, only to transition into an angled slice at the monk's wrist.

Liaoguan, unflustered, flipped his palm and caught the sharp edge bare-handed.

Yin Biyue's blade had been parried aside, but the chill lingered in his meridians. He had to lean on Yihu for support.

Locked in a stalemate, Luo Mingchuan and Liaoguan simultaneously closed their eyes and stilled their breaths. The hall fell into a still silence.

Yin Biyue had a sense that they'd entered a certain mysterious state akin to a Buddhist meditative stance. If he were to recklessly strike and break the balance, he might do harm to his shixiong. With no other choice, he watched them quietly, forcing himself to remain calm despite his burning anxiety.

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IN THE CULTIVATION WORLD, the power disparity between the current generation's young prodigies and a sage from a million years ago was too great. This was destined to be a confrontation unprecedented in history, never to be matched again in the future.

When they were young, the Sword Sage and Headmaster-xiansheng, one at the Small Ascension level and one at the Breakthrough level, had joined forces to slay a powerhouse at the Great Ascension level. That alone was an unbelievable legend. For them to hold their own against Liaoguan, even a firsthand witness would find it hard to believe. But this was not a contest of skill—it was a fight to the death.

Luo Mingchuan opened his eyes to a sea of blood stretching across the land. The sky churned with flame-red clouds that threatened to burn through the heavens. The wind carried the stench of death across the swirling sand. Tattered banners and corpses littered the fields, while the racing river ran red. The residual power of countless techniques and magics still lingered, leaving the landscape in ruins, the earth scorched black.

He stared at the scene, finding it vaguely familiar, until a Zen staff tore through the wind toward him.

Luo Mingchuan retreated across the river, but as the staff passed, it split the waters, sending towering waves a hundred feet high into the air with a deafening roar.

Liaoguan stood atop the opposite peak, his eyes gleaming with a terrifying intensity, his golden-red kasaya whipping in the wind. His form towered over the landscape. Luo Mingchuan leveled Chenzhou before him to block the turbulent waves like the long chains on the embankment.

Even though Chenzhou was a renowned sword of the present era, it could not withstand a strike from a Sage. The moment it deflected the staff, it was sent flying from his grip. It plunged into the depths of the river.

The staff returned to the mountaintop, reclaimed by Liaoguan. The colossal waves collapsed back into the river, though the billows were restless for a long time.

Luo Mingchuan reached the shore, his face pale and his robes drenched. His eyes darkened, and the ground of the mountain peak beneath Liaoguan's feet exploded. Boulders tumbled down and crumbled with a thunderous crash.

This was a remnant battlefield from the Dao-Demon War. In this meditation realm, the two clashed with their souls and wills. Here, Liaoguan was even stronger than when trapped within the Great Golden Light Array. He descended from the mountain, light as a bird in flight, yet the earth trembled with his every step. The mountain he had stood on might have collapsed, but his presence itself was a towering peak, his aura an impassible mountain.

Luo Mingchuan's meridians ruptured inch by inch. Blood gushed like a waterfall from his mouth, drenching his body. Unable to hold on, he collapsed to his knees. Liaoguan stood before him, looking down condescendingly. Slowly, he placed a hand on his head.

Back in the shrine, Luo Mingchuan's face paled, while Liaoguan's emaciated body grotesquely plumped with vitality. Yin Biyue was alarmed. Even if he couldn't see their fight, he knew the situation was dire. Without another thought, he thrust Yihu toward Liaoguan's heart. Before he could even touch the kasaya, the sword was forcefully repelled, and the immense recoil force ravaged his chest.

Yin Biyue collapsed at the foot of the altar, his body racked with agony. His vision swam with blood.

Liaoguan's expression was impassive, but a faint sparkle flickered in his eyes. The two young men had exceptional foundations. Their life force was enough for him to break the array today. The universe obviously wanted him to live, which meant he would surely achieve immortality one day.

Just then, Yihu quivered on the ground. The motion was so slight that not even Yin Biyue noticed. In the meditation realm, Luo Mingchuan, on the verge of death at Liaoguan's feet, raised his head. He was extremely weak, but his eyes were resolute.

When Liaoguan met those eyes, his own widened in alarm. The color drained from his face. He tried to pull away, to retreat, but it was too late. His cultivation gushed out of him through his palm, pouring wildly into Luo Mingchuan.

A gale battered the land. The earth shattered, mountains crumbled, and monstrous waves towered toward the sky.

Liaoguan wrenched himself free, then retreated a thousand miles in an instant. He hissed in shock. It couldn't be.

"Mo Changyuan!"

Chenzhou shot out of the lake, a blur in the wind, swifter than Liaoguan could move. It pierced his heart and pinned him mercilessly to the ground.

Both were using the eighth stage of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net—the technique of seizing another's cultivation and life force for oneself. When the two clashed, the difference was clear.

The meditation realm shattered.

Yin Biyue propped himself up with Yihu. Liaoguan's eyes snapped open, his eyes lined with scarlet. His mouth overflowed with blood as he laughed wildly.

"Ridiculous! How absurd! I didn't die by Linyuan, but at the hands of a demon—"

"My shixiong is not a demon!"

The shrine shook once more, and the beams, pillars, and walls began to collapse.

Luo Mingchuan's eyes were still firmly shut. Yin Biyue pulled him into his arms. Luo Mingchuan's breathing was steady, yet he wouldn't wake, and none of Yin Biyue's vital qi could penetrate his body.

The old monk, blood pouring from his mouth, watched the two. “You don’t want him to fall to demonic ways, but he can never turn back now…”

These malicious words were his last.

With the core of the Great Golden Light Array damaged, the ground beneath Xingshan Temple began to split. Fissures spread across the earth, sending panic through the monks above as they fled.

Yin Biyue’s vital qi was spent, his injuries severe. Even knowing the shrine was collapsing, the situation dire beyond measure, he couldn’t move an inch with Luo Mingchuan unconscious in his arms. Amid the world-shaking tremors and blinding dust, he shielded Luo Mingchuan as best he could in a corner of the hall. For a moment, he truly believed they had reached the end.

Then, a brilliant sword glare sundered the smoke, putting a sudden end to the clamor.

“Let’s go,” said a clear, youthful voice.

Chapter 65

ARE YOU KIDDING ME? How?! Yin Biyue thought.

The ground fell away beneath his feet. Wispy clouds gathered out of thin air, and he and Luo Mingchuan were lifted into the air alongside the newcomer. The forest of the collapsed dragon vein shrank rapidly behind them, then the ruined halls of Xingshan Temple flashed past in a blur. The speed was so fast that a howling wind filled his ears, and the white mist rushing against his face obscured the figure before him.

"S-sir…" He wanted to express his gratitude, but the cold wind rushed into his mouth when he opened it. His teeth chattered uncontrollably.

The person in front of him seemed to realize his discomfort and waved a sleeve. They were still soaring through the air, but the wind quieted and the chill dissipated. An invisible barrier was protecting them from the elements.

After so many astonishing events today, Yin Biyue thought his mental capacity had greatly improved. Regardless, when he finally got a clear look at the youthful face of the white-clad swordsman, the word "sir" stuck in his throat.

Standing on the clouds, the youth looked confidently down at him and tilted his head to one side. "Lao-si, aren't you happy to see your master?"

…My master.

…Master?

Pardon?

Yin Biyue was rendered utterly speechless this time.

How? How in the world was this person, who looked about the same age as him, his legendary, almighty master? The shock was comparable to being transmigrated on the spot into the wrong script.

"H-h-happy, happy." He was still too stunned to speak properly.

If not my master, who else *could flex like this and whisk me away into the skies?*

On closer inspection, the youth did bear a decent resemblance to the portrait on Xihua Peak, though he was younger by at least twenty years. The Sword Sage laughed with a handsome smile, his blade-sharp brow softening.

As Yin Biyue snapped back to reality, countless questions flooded his mind.

What was the connection between his shixiong and the Demon Lord? How much did Headmaster-xiansheng and Xingshan Temple know about it? What about his master?

He'd heard his master had gone to the Yunxing Abyss. Did something happen there? Were there really demons down there? And his Yihu sword. Its origins were clearly extraordinary. Had his master made a mistake when passing it down? Or had his elder shixiong given him the wrong one? The sword surely couldn't have mutated on its own. If there was anyone in this world who could answer these mysteries, it would undoubtedly be the Sword Sage.

But right now, none of those questions mattered as much as one thing.

"Shifu! Luo-shixiong was severely injured just now…"

The Sword Sage seemed to only then notice the person cradled in his disciple's arms. Under Yin Biyue's hopeful gaze, he leaned over and checked Luo Mingchuan's pulse.

"Mm…" Wei Jingfeng clapped Yin Biyue firmly on the shoulder. "He'll live."

Yin Biyue felt a jolt of energy, as if all of his injuries big and small had healed in an instant. The feeling was soothing, but he still frowned with worry. "But he's still unconscious…"

Wei Jingfeng pulled an exasperated face, though the effect was somewhat lost coming from such a youthful man. Yin Biyue quickly caught on. His master's cultivation was number one in the world! If he said Luo Mingchuan would be fine, then of course Yin Biyue should trust him.

"When he wakes depends on him," Wei Jingfeng said with a dismissive wave. "If an old man like me forces the issue, he might wake up an idiot… Hey, stop hugging him so tightly."

Lao-si is already awfully devoted to him, Wei Jingfeng thought miserably. *All my disciples are honest souls. Only Lao-wu is clever like me. Too bad he's caught up in a bunch of family drama. Tsk. The future is bleak.*

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RIDING ON THE WIND, they traversed a thousand miles in an instant.

Looking down at Cangya's mountain gates from the clouds, the golden and emerald peaks dotted with glazed rooftops exuded a lofty sense of majesty. Yin Biyue's heart swelled with emotion. He'd left the mountain in spring, and now it was late autumn. Before departing for the Flower-Plucking Tournament, he'd never imagined so much would happen on his journey. More than once, he thought he might not return.

He hadn't seen Wei Jingfeng move, but the clouds beneath them gently descended.

Cangya's mountain-protection array was under the control of Sect Leader Zhengyangzi and Jun Yu, so they were always the first to know of any disturbances. The two were waiting in front of the Sword Sage's courtyard on Xihua Peak, one with a bristling beard, the other cradling a sword.

Jun Yu bowed respectfully. "Shifu."

Zhengyangzi, meanwhile, rushed forward and took Luo Mingchuan from Yin Biyue's arms. "Oh, my eldest disciple! What happened? He was so full of life and energy when he left!"

The Sword Sage ignored him to push open the courtyard gate. A thick layer of dust cascaded down, forcing him to raise his hand and cast a dust-repelling spell. He turned to *his* eldest disciple.

"Ahem. It's been a few days since I've been back… You've grown taller. Taller than me now."

"Not 'a few days,'" Jun Yu corrected. "It has been one hundred and three years, seven months, and fifteen days."

Yin Biyue was astonished to see his irreverent, carefree master look embarrassed. Wei Jingfeng glanced at Luo Mingchuan and changed the subject. "Let's take him to Qinghe Hall. We have some matters to discuss."

Zhengyangzi activated the Cangya Token, and the group reappeared in Qinghe Hall on the main peak, Xiqian. Luo Mingchuan was settled into the inner chamber.

When Wei Jingfeng had first joined Cangya, Zhengyangzi had been his shixiong from the same peak. In his eyes, this shidi of his had always been reckless, prone to trouble, and too willing to throw himself into danger. Thankfully, after he reached Sagehood, no one dared provoke him anymore.

Looking at Luo Mingchuan unconscious in bed, Zhengyangzi felt transported back to those days when Wei Jingfeng vexed him to the point of spitting blood. He shuddered at the memories.

"What on earth happened?"

"No idea," Wei Jingfeng replied, succinct and infuriating as ever.

Seeing Zhengyangzi about to hyperventilate, Yin Biyue quickly stepped in to explain.

Starting from their arrival at Xingshan Temple, he recounted everything except for the illusion in the Buddhist shrine in the abyss. After all, his shifu was here and certainly could have perceived everything else. If the Sword Sage had claimed ignorance earlier, it was probably out of laziness. Yin Biyue wasn't sure anything could escape a Sage's perception.

"We only went to Xingshan Temple because Shixiong wanted to cure my affliction," he concluded. "It's my fault. Thankfully, Shifu arrived in time to save us."

A heavy silence followed.

Zhengyangzi glared at him. "How is it your fault? It's those bald asses at Xingshan Temple who've lost their minds! They even had the audacity to send me a missive demanding compensation for all of their halls and homes collapsing. Do they actually expect us to pay?!"

Yin Biyue was stunned. Xingshan Temple was a massive institution of a million years. The damage shouldn't have been that extensive, even if their array had been destroyed. He subconsciously looked at his master. Wei Jingfeng shrugged, but the words *Yeah, I did it. Deal with it!* were written all over his face.

Jun Yu seemed just as upset. "False compassion. They are no Buddhists."

Yin Biyue was exasperated. Why was no one paying attention to the fact that Liaoguan had survived from a million years ago, the Demon Lord Mo Changyuan's ambition to reincarnate had been revealed, and that his shixiong could very possibly have fallen to demonic cultivation? Wasn't anyone *shocked*?! Were these not the *actual* issues?!

His master seemed to read his mind. "Whether he's fallen to demonic ways or not doesn't matter. What matters is whether or not he's still himself."

Zhengyangzi understood the gravity of his words. "Which means when he wakes again, he might be the Demon Lord?"

The hall fell into silence once more.

“Well,” Wei Jingfeng said at last, “that depends on his willpower.”

Strangely, Zhengyangzi relaxed at this. “Then there’s no problem. All right. Everyone’s dismissed.” His faith in Luo Mingchuan was absolute to the point of irresponsibility.

Yin Biyue was aghast, all the more so when his master actually nodded and prepared to leave. *Guys, this is a Huge Deal! How can you all be so casual about this?! If the Demon Lord knew how little you cared, he’d cry himself to death!*

Jun Yu, stern and solemn as always, addressed the Sword Sage directly. “Ershimei went to the Floating Sea to look after Wushidi. Sanshidi still hasn’t returned.”

Yin Biyue knew his shijie must have read the farewell letter from Duan Chongxuan and gone after him out of worry. As for his third shixiong, he was probably…still hiding from Junior Sect Leader Song. Yin Biyue suddenly thought his elder shixiong being left all alone on the mountain was a little pitiful.

“Shifu, your courtyard hasn’t been cleaned,” Jun Yu continued. “Why don’t you stay with me for now?”

The Sword Sage grunted and followed him. Before he left, he glanced back. “Lao-si, you’re not going to rest for a bit?”

Yin Biyue shook his head. “I’ll stay with Luo-shixiong.”

The Sword Sage made a face but said nothing more and left. Zhengyangzi, however, strode off with renewed vigor, looking immensely pleased.

Yin Biyue added calming osmanthus-ice incense to the nephrite incense burner carved with a lotus pattern. Smoke curled upward in lazy swirls. Inside the sparse inner chamber, only the polished, gray jade tiles reflected Yin Biyue’s figure. As the sky dimmed, he lit a lamp and sat by the bed, gazing vacantly at Luo Mingchuan in the bed.

Shixiong’s ability to recover was indeed astonishing. His external wounds had already healed seamlessly, and his complexion had regained color. His lashes cast peaceful shadows, his expression soft, as if he was just asleep. But the Sword Sage had said his awakening depended on fate.

Perhaps, like in the meditation realm, his shixiong was locked in a struggle. When he triumphed was when he would wake.

The Sword Sage couldn't help him. This was his battle alone to fight. Yin Biyue could do nothing but watch.

He suddenly remembered how many times Luo Mingchuan had cared for him while he was unconscious. Now it was his turn to watch over his shixiong, even if he couldn't help.

Bells tolled in the distance. He could faintly hear the laughter of Cangya disciples over at the Administration Hall. Everything was just as it always was.

He was happy to meet his shifu today, happy to return to Cangya, happy to see that his elder shixiong had broken through to the next level. These were the people and things that mattered the most to him in this world. If the need ever arose, he would wield his sword and fight for them without hesitation.

But what about Luo Mingchuan?

Yin Biyue felt a pang of anxiety. He realized that, at some point, he had grown used to relying on his shixiong. The night they left Ye City, Luo Mingchuan had said, *"Cultivation and life have always been solitary journeys."* Nevertheless, Yin Biyue wanted to walk alongside Luo Mingchuan. Just as they had on this journey so far: cultivating together, training together, traveling to distant places together, trusting each other with their lives against formidable foes and unknown dangers.

The night was quiet. The moon hanging above spilled its cool light across the earth. Yin Biyue stepped outside onto the grand steps for some air. His turbulent thoughts gradually calmed while he gazed at the verdant, moonlit mountains.

Turning, he saw Zhengyangzi also standing there on the steps, his back slightly hunched. The moonlight seemed to have deepened the wrinkles at his temples. Yin Biyue greeted him, but Zhengyangzi waved him off. It was a long time before Zhengyangzi spoke, his slightly cracked voice scattering in the wind.

"I've actually known for a year, but I refused to believe it. At the time, I thought…even if it were true, how could I abandon my own

disciple?”

Yin Biyue knew he was talking about Luo Mingchuan and the Demon Lord.

“I don’t understand.” Zhengyangzi sighed. “Why him? Why would this fate fall on him, when he hasn’t done anything wrong?”

Asking the heavens for answers was futile. So much suffering in the mortal world could be explained away with “fate.” Zhengyangzi knew this. But right now, he wasn’t the stern sect leader, but a master who might lose his disciple.

“There will be a way,” Yin Biyue said. “Have faith in Shixiong. Wait until he wakes.” His tone was firm, as if to say such a trivial matter couldn’t possibly defeat Luo Mingchuan.

“Indeed. There will be a way.”

Yin Biyue looked up at the voice and saw the Sword Sage perched on the grand hall’s upturned eaves, robes fluttering, with Jun Yu standing beside him.

Yin Biyue smiled.

Although many mysteries remained unsolved, none of that mattered now. They all believed in Luo Mingchuan. Together, they would defy destiny and face any upheavals that followed in the unknown future. If necessary, they would demand an answer from the heavens.

Chapter 66

MANY MAJOR EVENTS had recently taken place in the cultivation world. The power dynamics in certain regions were shifting, both overtly and covertly, enough so that the news reached the isolated Eastern Continent.

People had thought that the biggest incident would be Cangya's chief disciple and the Sword Sage's disciple storming Xingshan Temple and breaking the Great Golden Light Array. What could possibly be bigger than the collapse of a million-year-old institution? Then, only three days later, the Sword Sage reappeared. No one had heard from him in years, and some rumors had even suggested he'd died in the Yunxing Abyss.

The world was shocked. Some were thrilled, while others panicked.

Although Xingshan Temple was nestled deep within the Tixiang Mountains and had always kept a low profile, it was nonetheless one of the "Twin Buddhist Temples." Many eyes were fixed upon it.

No one knew what had transpired after Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue had entered the temple. Some claimed that Buddhists were known to be compassionate and tolerant, so the two must have acted discourteously first. Those who had participated in or spectated the Flower-Plucking Tournament dismissed the theory outright. They all insisted that Yin Biyue was gentler than Buddhist cultivators, while Luo Mingchuan was the epitome of a mild-tempered, noble gentleman.

What became clear was that the Sword Sage had appeared at some point. He'd never unsheathed Qiufeng Li, but nearly a hundred halls and houses had collapsed, just like leaves in the passing autumn wind.

Once that was known, all talk of the incident came to a stop. The Sage's sword was the law. What need was there for justification? Hadn't the Sword Sage disabled a grandmaster elder of Baopu Sect with a single Broad Daylight strike by Ba River? Had Baopu Sect dared demand justification?

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THE HENGDUAN MOUNTAINS were shrouded in gloom. Elders and disciples in the know were quiet as they hurried about to reinforce arrays and drill sword formations. The Second Sage Yu Shi stood atop the misty peak for five days without moving.

Some actions had not been carried out discreetly enough. Even if the Sword Sage was no master of divination, his level alone granted him innate clarity. Could he really not know?

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MEANWHILE, BACK AT CANGYA, the disciples learned that Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan had returned safely. However, they also heard that Luo-shixiong's injuries required absolute rest, making visits untenable. Nonetheless, many lingered outside the main hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of him—even though they couldn't possibly see anything.

He Yanyun pestered Zhengyangzi for updates. Upon discovering that Yin Biyue was inside tending to Luo Mingchuan, she felt reassured and returned to training with Ruan Xiaolian.

Yin Biyue now knew that the hall they occupied was the core of Cangya's mountain-protection array. If the man who awoke was the Demon Lord, the entire mountain's dragon vein could temporarily restrain him. Coupled with the Sword Sage and Jun Yu's presence, it gave them an 80 percent chance of subduing Mo Changyuan while he was still weak.

Luo Mingchuan could wake at any moment. No visitors were allowed. They hoped and believed in the best, but were also prepared for the worst.

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THE MOMENT OF TRUTH arrived in the evening.

Bells tolled, startling birds into flight. Some disciples practicing swords on a peak stopped for the day and descended. The Administrative Hall closed, and the gathered crowds dispersed for the night. It was not quiet, but it was peaceful.

Luo Mingchuan opened his eyes. The amber hues of his irises caught the last rays of the setting sun, shimmering and brimming with tenderness.

He had dreamed a very long dream. Seeing the one beside him, he blinked, wondering if he was still dreaming.

“Shixiong,” Yin Biyue said softly.

Luo Mingchuan replied with equal softness. “Shidi, I’m back.”

They smiled at each other.

Before long, the other three entered. Luo Mingchuan, oblivious, remained fixated on Yin Biyue.

Zhengyangzi huffed, his beard bristling. “Your shifu is standing right here!”

Calling for your shidi first—Shidi’s all you know! Hmph!

Luo Mingchuan rose to bow. Yin Biyue moved to support him, but he gestured that he was fine.

“Shifu,” he said, “I’ve fallen to demonic cultivation. The Ghara Pupil Technique is the first stage of the demonic art, Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.”

Zhengyangzi froze.

The Sword Sage waved dismissively. “Who’d know if you didn’t say anything?”

“Exactly! Who’d know?” Zhengyangzi agreed. “Since you’re fine now, lively as ever, go teach a few classes at the Discourse Hall tomorrow.” He beckoned the Sword Sage and Jun Yu. “All right, then. Everyone is dismissed.”

The Sword Sage stepped forward and caught Luo Mingchuan's wrist to check his pulse. He quickly let go, then left with Jun Yu in tow. The great hall became empty again.

Luo Mingchuan sensed that the youth who'd taken his pulse just now had been someone extraordinary. His casual touch was impossible to evade, and though he appeared idle, his aura was unfathomably deep. When he exited the hall, Jun Yu paused and bowed slightly to let him pass first—a gesture of respect toward elders.

Luo Mingchuan was astute. The answer, though unbelievable, came to him immediately. "Was that…the Sword Sage?"

Yin Biyue secretly reveled in the moment. Finally, someone understood how he'd felt when he'd seen that youthful face in the clouds. "Yes. That was my master," he said with a nod.

Luo Mingchuan quickly accepted the truth. A Sage's divine abilities defied mortal logic, so it followed that their appearances were the same.

"Shixiong, are you sure you're not feeling unwell anywhere?" Yin Biyue pressed.

Luo Mingchuan smiled. "I'm perfectly fine." Knowing his shidi had many questions, he continued, "When we fought Liaoguan at the shrine, he lured me into a meditative realm. It was an ancient battlefield from the Great Dao-Demon War. His technique was strange. It seemed to absorb my life force and cultivation for his own use."

Yin Biyue had guessed as much when he'd seen Luo Mingchuan's rapidly deteriorating complexion. For a monk to use such a technique was unimaginably evil.

Luo Mingchuan lowered his voice. "I thought I was about to die, when suddenly a force, or rather, some*thing*, entered my body. It compelled me to use the same technique as Liaoguan, but ten times more potent. That was how I killed him."

Yin Biyue's heart sank. He recalled Liaoguan's dying words: *"Perish at the hands of a demon."* Maybe that something was a remnant of the Demon Lord Mo Changyuan's soul.

"Is it still inside you now?"

“No.” Luo Mingchuan shook his head. “It’s gone. I don’t know where, but it’s not inside my body. I retained Liaoguan’s life force. As for his cultivation, I would have died absorbing it all at once, so I sealed it within my spirit. That’s why I’ve been unconscious.”

Yin Biyue sighed in relief.

“While asleep, I saw fragments of memories that belonged to Liaoguan. Among them was the complete manual for the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.”

It had been surreal to intermittently witness another’s lifetime: his entrance as a child into the Buddhist order; his time as a prodigious youth consumed by ambition; his turn from Buddhism to Daoism; his collusion with Mo Changyuan and descent into the demonic arts; their cocreation of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net that shattered barriers among the different cultivation paths. Finally, his betrayal of the Immortal Yi Lingxiao at the climax of the Great Dao-Demon War, followed by his mortal wounding in turn…

The two strolled through the hall, their shadows stretched out before them in the sunset’s light. The rhythm of their footsteps and hushed conversation echoed.

A dreadful suspicion struck Yin Biyue. Liaoguan had said, *“You don’t want him to fall to demonic ways, but he can never turn back now.”* There must have been something inexorable about the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.

Sure enough, Luo Mingchuan stopped walking. “I plan to go into seclusion in a few days to purge my cultivation.” He spoke calmly, as if making a decision unrelated to himself.

Yin Biyue was aghast. “Why?”

“By the eighth stage of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net, the practitioner must continuously consume others’ life force and cultivation or face withering and death. I’ve already mastered the first stage, the Ghara Pupil Technique. Even if I stop now, my vital qi will continue cycling, slowly advancing my level. This is a technique that cannot be stopped once started.” Luo Mingchuan smiled. “Destroy and then rebuild. Restarting the path of cultivation anew to gain deeper insights. It won’t be too hard.”

Yin Biyue knew his shixiong was trying to comfort him. Purging one's cultivation was perilous beyond measure, a gamble with death. How could it not be hard?! His heart ached for him.

Yin Biyue couldn't let it go just like that. "Is there…really no other way?"

Luo Mingchuan hesitated for a moment but chose to tell the truth. He and his shidi were open with each other. Trust precluded lies.

"There is. Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net was created by two. Neither Mo Changyuan nor Liaoguan anticipated that the completed technique would require joint practice to avoid fatal flaws. While they collaborated, they were suspicious of each other. They could never practice it together, nor could they entrust their lives to anyone. So they practiced it alone. When they reached the eighth stage, they had to consume the life force of others to sustain the technique…"

Yin Biyue had not expected a solution. All of a sudden, even the twilight colors outside the window looked more beautiful. Delight sparkled in his eyes. "So it's that easy! I'll practice with you, Shixiong!"

Luo Mingchuan creased his brows, avoiding Yin Biyue's eyes. "Shidi, this isn't a game…"

Yin Biyue's heart sank. Purging his cultivation or joint practice—the pros and cons to each were obvious. Why would his shixiong refuse? He looked straight at Luo Mingchuan.

"Of course it's not a game! I'm not afraid of falling to the demonic path. Cultivation is not inherently good or evil. Since it doesn't require us to drain each other's life force and has no other problems, why not?"

Luo Mingchuan no longer hid and met his eyes squarely. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Although he had sealed away Liaoguan's cultivation, his own power had surged dramatically since returning from Xingshan Temple. He normally kept his aura well in check, but in that moment, it erupted uncontrollably. Caught off guard, Yin Biyue was forced back several steps before he fell backward onto the bed in disbelief.

Luo Mingchuan immediately backed away, afraid to hurt Yin Biyue. His voice turned heavy and stiff with suppressed emotion. “We’ll discuss this after your crowning ceremony.”

“Shixiong, I’m not a child!” Yin Biyue stood to face him, undaunted. “Would you really rather destroy your cultivation and rebuild from scratch than trust me?”

He couldn’t understand what reservations Luo Mingchuan could possibly have. Did he think him too immature to make his own decisions?

“That’s not what I meant…”

This was their first real argument. Yin Biyue stormed out.

The great hall was left empty and desolate, the light dim. Luo Mingchuan sat alone on the bed. He massaged between his brows, feeling his head throb. Though it was true that Yin Biyue wasn’t a child anymore, he really didn’t understand what he was proposing.

Who would have guessed that two ambitious overlords of the Age of Sages would inadvertently create a technique that required dual cultivation?

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BY THE TIME YIN BIYUE reached Xihua Peak, he’d calmed down. He’d been too impetuous earlier. He didn’t doubt his shixiong’s trust in him. In the heat of the moment, he’d spoken in anger. Luo Mingchuan must have other concerns. They would talk calmly later.

When Yin Biyue visited Tianxin Cliff, he saw Wei Jingfeng instructing Jun Yu. The Sword Sage beckoned Yin Biyue over when he spotted him.

Sword qi darted through the air, sending leaves swirling. This was Yin Biyue’s second time watching Jun Yu practice. It was still the Chongshan Minor created by the Sword Sage, but the difference from before Yin Biyue’s journey was like night and day. Had he not been standing beside his shifu, the energy alone would have made his blood churn. The cliffside mist parted beneath Jun Yu’s slashing blade to reveal

towering bluffs and majestic landscapes awash with dusk's golden light. Jun Yu sheathed his sword. The lingering sword qi accentuated his sharp, solemn demeanor.

"There's nothing left for me to teach you about this set," Wei Jingfeng said, sounding proud.

Jun Yu bowed. "Shifu."

"However, that was *my* sword. It's time you have your own."

This was the highest form of approval, an acknowledgment that Jun Yu had reached the level to create his own sword arts or even establish a new sect. Yin Biyue smiled, genuinely happy for his elder shixiong—but Jun Yu looked lost.

The Sword Sage didn't seem to notice. "This old fellow will be taking your shidi on a trip tomorrow. I've got some business to deal with."

Yin Biyue started. *Shidi? Me? Ah! Shifu is taking me flying again?*

Jun Yu's eyes flickered with emotion, and he seemed about to ask something.

But, in the end, he only nodded at Yin Biyue. "Take care."

Yin Biyue had a feeling those words were meant for Wei Jingfeng.

Chapter 67

"SHIFU, WHEN DO WE DEPART?"

"We'll discuss that tomorrow. This old fellow is going to bed first." For a Sage, sleep was no longer a necessity, but Wei Jingfeng had a fondness for it. He turned and called to Jun Yu. "Let's go."

Together, they headed toward Jun Yu's courtyard. The moon was just rising over the horizon. The autumn night air carried a lonely chill, and the rustling of the forest echoed like waves. From Yin Biyue's perspective, under the dimming sky, the two figures' silhouettes looked like they stood shoulder to shoulder. However, he knew Jun Yu always remained one step behind their shifu. It was an unbreachable mark of reverence.

It suddenly struck Yin Biyue that being the Sword Sage's first disciple held a unique significance. If anyone in this world could truly understand him, it would undoubtedly be Jun Yu.

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THE NEXT DAY, Luo Mingchuan lectured at the Discourse Hall, Cangya's elementary schoolhouse. As the sect's chief disciple, Luo Mingchuan often taught basic principles there. Located near the Administration Hall, it was one of the liveliest places on the mountain, with a constant flow of people. The topics he covered during his lecture were foundational cultivation knowledge, such as marrow purification, the pathways vital qi took through meridians, how martial cultivators should choose techniques, and how spiritual cultivators should absorb energy from the natural world. These were standard lessons for young disciples newly admitted to Cangya, but the audience was packed, spanning cultivators of all levels.

Yin Biyue stood at the entrance to the hall and nodded at the disciples who stopped to greet him. Those with lower seniority bowed. After his journey down the mountain, he had grown more used to such interactions and no longer felt so awkward. It didn't take long before Luo Mingchuan's lecture ended, and he emerged surrounded by disciples.

Luo Mingchuan hadn't expected to see Yin Biyue waiting outside. A flicker of surprise crossed his face before he stepped forward, his lips curling into a subconscious smile.

"Shidi…"

The crowd around him dispersed like a kaleidoscope of disrupted butterflies. The position by Luo Mingchuan's side immediately opened. The disciples passing by also wordlessly detoured around the duo to give them space.

"Were you waiting long?"

Yin Biyue shook his head. "No."

Neither mentioned yesterday's argument.

"Shifu is taking me out today on a task run… I'm not sure when I'll be back."

Luo Mingchuan's smile wavered with disappointment, but he didn't hesitate to offer his sincere congratulations. "The Sword Sage's guidance is rare. When you return, Shidi, you'll surely reach new heights."

"I think it'll be quick," Yin Biyue said with a nod.

Luo Mingchuan chuckled. "Come. I'll walk you back."

They walked in silence, the only sound the crunch of fallen leaves beneath their boots. They stopped at the foot of Xihua Peak, where people were scarce. The sky was a clear blue, the ground carpeted in golden leaves. The autumn air was crisp.

Yin Biyue felt he had thought things through. "Shixiong, will you hold off on making a decision about your cultivation until I come back?"

Luo Mingchuan didn't answer. He didn't know how to explain the truth to his innocent shidi.

“Maybe I’m not mature enough yet, but traveling with Shifu will help me grow. When I come back, we’ll figure it out together… Or we can wait until my crowning ceremony, as you said?” he asked with a pleading shine in his eyes. Yin Biyue felt this was the best he’d ever expressed himself. If his shixiong still refused, then he was completely out of ideas.

To Luo Mingchuan, Yin Biyue’s cool expression suddenly came alive. His eyes shimmered like the ripples of autumn waves, as pitiful as any fluffy kitten from the academy.

Luo Mingchuan blinked, and his resolve wavered. In that moment, nothing else mattered. “All right. Whatever you say.”

Yin Biyue sighed in relief, his smile widening.

Wei Jingfeng clicked his tongue in the background; he and Jun Yu had walked in on this exchange right after they’d descended from Xihua Peak.

“No need to see me off. Go back.” He waved Jun Yu away. Although Jun Yu halted, he didn’t leave.

Luo Mingchuan bowed to the Sword Sage.

Wei Jingfeng usually couldn’t stand these formalities, but today he was oddly pleased (and amused). *Who cares if you’re the True Immortal or Demon Lord? You still have to bow to me. Not too bad for a Sage.*

Yin Biyue realized he hadn’t spoken much with Jun Yu since returning. He approached Jun Yu and opened his mouth, but couldn’t think of anything to say. In the end, he resorted to ordinary small talk: “Congratulations on your progress in the sword, Dashixiong.”

Jun Yu pondered that for a moment. “You’ve improved greatly as well, Shidi.”

His expression remained stern, his tone stiff. But Yin Biyue knew his elder shixiong was trying his best. Yin Biyue bowed in farewell, then Jun Yu took his elbow and helped him up. Neither was the talkative type, yet the close bond between peers of the same peak was obvious.

“Let’s go, Lao-si,” Wei Jingfeng said.

When Yin Biyue looked back for the last time, he saw Luo Mingchuan bathed in autumn’s morning light. His eyes twinkled, and his

smile was like the glow of warm jade, faint and gentle.

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YIN BIYUE HAD ASSUMED that since his shifu could ride the wind and cross continents in a day, whatever business they had would be swiftly concluded. Instead, they went shopping.

Twenty miles from the Cangya Mountains, they wove through the bustling crowds of Lüeyang City, where the bluestone tiles were still damp with yesterday's rain, and the golden parasol-tree leaves drifted aimlessly through the air. Tavern signs swayed overhead, and the ambrosial fragrance of strong liquor mingling with the steam from roadside lamb offal soup was enough to ward off autumn's chill. Many pedestrians had their hands tucked into their threadbare robes. In weather like this, even the most beauty-conscious young ladies exchanged their fashionable summer silks for thick, practical cotton.

The Sword Sage donned a cloak to match the season and recited, "Yellow leaves still face wind and rain; blue towers keep their songs unchanged."[6] Qiufeng Li was a finely crafted short sword adorned with pearls. It dangled from his waist like an elegant ornament, while the man himself sauntered like a gallivanting young noble.

It suddenly struck Yin Biyue why only a handful in the world had recognized Wei Jingfeng as the Sword Sage. No one expected him to look like this.

Upon finishing his verse, We Jingfeng let his eyes roam over the street. "I remember there was a shop in Lüeyang that made excellent braised beef brisket… Ah, and that Miss Luhua at Chunxiu Pavilion. Her little songs are also lovely…" He turned to Yin Biyue. "Lao-si, have you ever visited a brothel before?"

Yin Biyue was so shocked his breath caught in his chest and he nearly choked on his own spit. "N-no," he coughed. "Never…"

That couldn’t mean what he thought it meant! Surely it was just like in Ye City, when he’d misunderstood Duan Chongxuan’s invitation. His shifu’s cultivation was profound, his virtue as great as a mountain. How could he suggest—

“Come, Shifu will take you to a brothel!”

With a broad wave, Wei Jingfeng caught his stunned disciple by the hand and dragged him into a back alley.

No way! I really didn’t overthink it this time.

Figures in perfumed silks drifted through the small lane that wafted with the sweet fragrance of wine and flowers. Yin Biyue was still dazed when they crossed the threshold.

Fancy lanterns weren’t lit during the day at Chunxiu Pavilion, so the interior was dim. A brazier burned merrily in the main hall, where a few tables of patrons laughed over drinks in thick Lüeyang accents.

The middle-aged madam was leaning against the counter, painting her nails. She just glanced at the newcomers. Were it not for his sharp senses detecting the faint scent of rouge and flowers, Yin Biyue would’ve thought they’d entered the wrong establishment.

This is nothing like the brothels I imagined. Where are the sweet beckoning ladies? T_T

Are we going to sit here drinking until the special night activities start? Like Miss Luhua’s ‘little songs’?

Before he could ponder further, the Sword Sage strode to the counter and set down a silver ingot. “Miss, got any ‘Fleeting Life’s Joy’ left, ya?”

Yin Biyue was shocked to find Wei Jingfeng knew the Lüeyang dialect!

The madam weighed the silver, then produced a jug of wine from under the counter with a thud. The vessel banged on the countertop, scattering dust.

They took a corner table by the window. Wei Jingfeng unsealed the jug with practiced ease, and a fresh fragrance filled the air. Yin Biyue filled their bowls, then followed Wei Jingfeng’s gaze outside. Every so often, ladies from other brothels passed by, swaying their slender hips, their

hairpins glinting in the sun. The entire alley radiated sensual charm. Nearby, other patrons erupted in raucous laughter and slapped the tables over some joke.

The Sword Sage took a sip of wine and sighed contentedly. “What have you been practicing lately?”

Yin Biyue tried to be prudent in his answers. “At the beginning, I started with the Cangya Sword. After Marrow Purification, I practiced the forty-nine stances of the Coldwater Blade. I’ve also learned a bit of the Broad Daylight Sword…”

After he’d given his serious answers, he realized Wei Jingfeng was just making conversation.

“Ah… Broad Daylight.” He sighed nostalgically. “My sword. A good sword…” And that was it on the subject. “What’s your favorite tea?” he asked next.

“Junshan Mist Tea.”

“This old fellow likes that too. Shame good leaves are scarce in recent years…”

Yin Biyue felt an unexpected calm settle over him.

From the moment he entered Xingshan Temple to the time he spent guarding his shixiong’s bedside, his nerves had been frayed. Unease left him stressed. Here, there were no schemes or riddles, no looming threats of a sword over his head, and no pressure to train and train. It was like sitting under the locust tree at the academy, sipping tea with Headmaster-xiansheng. As he drank in a brothel’s front room with the Sword Sage, surrounded by lively noise, exchanging idle words, Yin Biyue’s heart was at peace. Fine wine, fair ladies. Such time-wasting pursuits *did* feel a little absurd, though, when shared with his shifu.

Half the jug was empty when Wei Jingfeng stopped pouring. Yin Biyue followed suit and set down his bowl.

Just then, a new voice, thick with a Lüeyang accent, called across the hall: “Miss, got any ‘Fleeting Life’s Joy’ left, ya?”

“Last jug went to that table, eh.”

Yin Biyue glanced over and locked eyes with the man at the counter. Both froze.

Of all places, Sanshixiong! Why is it that every time we meet, you're either drinking or on your way to drink?!

Noticing Yin Biyue's companion, Yan Xing wondered if he was drunk and seeing things. "Shi…Shi…?"

The Sword Sage produced an empty wine bowl from somewhere and beckoned. "Come here."

Yan Xing scurried over, grinning. "Shifu, you saved this for me? You're so good to me… I heard you'd returned. I was just rushing back to Cangya!"

This anyone-with-booze-is-Daddy attitude once again reset Yin Biyue's lofty image of the great Water Slasher Yan Xing.

Sanshixiong, you're not rushing. You came to the brothel to buy booze. We saw you. It then struck Yin Biyue that half of Xihua Peak's six members were now drinking in a brothel. *What the heck are we doing?*

Yan Xing drank merrily. He even ordered a plate of braised beef and pickled peanuts to accompany the wine, while bantering with the older but still attractive madam. "Why doesn't Miss Luhua sing us a song today?"

Yin Biyue perked up, scanning the room to see where the young lady Yan Xing had addressed was.

"Autumn dryness has got my throat sore, ya," the madam drawled. "Can't sing a note."

Yin Biyue was struck speechless.

The Sword Sage clicked his tongue at his reaction, as if lamenting his naivete.

Not fair… Who do I even complain to about this? QAQ

Chapter 68

THE AUTUMN SEASON in Lüeyang City was always accompanied by the continuous pitter-patter of rain. As soon as the showers came down, fewer swaying skirts dallied in the flowery pleasure lane. Even the most enchanting flowers took on an air of damp misery. Drifting in with the chilly west wind, raindrops cascaded from the eaves like strings of pearls.

The outside was all bleak wind and cold rain, while the inside was warm with wine and dim lanterns. Yin Biyue's alcohol tolerance was average, far inferior to the other two. By now, he was a little tipsy.

"You brought this on yourself!" Wei Jingfeng scolded Yan Xing. "I've met that Song boy. Decent family, good upbringing. Ruining his reputation like that… Don't tell people I taught you."

Yan Xing, chewing on pickled peanuts, nodded repeatedly, his words slurred. "Yes, yes, yes, I deserve it…"

Yin Biyue laughed. He wanted to say something like, *Sanshixiong, you don't need to hide anymore. Wushidi has already talked to Junior Sect Leader Song. Next time you meet, he won't draw his sword. He'll give you a chance to explain yourself.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but his head was so heavy. The alcohol was really hitting him. Who would've thought the refreshingly crisp Fleeting Life's Joy had such a strong kick? Propping his head up, he watched blearily as his shifu and third shixiong clinked bowls and slapped the table in animated conversation. He couldn't catch what they were saying, and then he passed out.

He slept deeply. When he woke, the rain had stopped, and the sky was dark. A green lantern had appeared on the table at some point. The scent of wine mixed with the damp, cool wind refreshed him more than a night of meditation ever could. It was a refreshment of the spirit.

The Sword Sage rose to close the window. After finishing the last bowl of wine, he turned to his third disciple. "This old fellow is leaving. No

need to see me off.”

Yin Biyue bade farewell to Yan Xing and followed.

The moment they stepped out the door, Yan Xing called after them. “Shifu…”

His voice was soft, drowned instantly by the hall’s clamor. The Sword Sage paused. With his back facing the door, he waved, his gesture one of carefree grace. The madam approached wordlessly and dropped another jug of wine on his table.

In the alley, ladies in groups of twos and threes gathered under dripping eaves. Their gauzy dresses were damp, but they laughed among themselves. Some carried the fresh flowers back to second-floor balconies, where they lit crimson-tasseled lanterns that glowed with warmth. Some entered the alley, turning with familiar ease into certain buildings.

As Yin Biyue and Wei Jingfeng stepped out, the narrow alley felt even more cramped. They moved against the flow and emerged onto the empty main street, where gray leaves fell from the parasol trees. It felt like a completely different world.

The Sword Sage glanced at the dimming sky. “Got to take care of another thing…”

Before Yin Biyue could catch what he’d said, his feet left the ground. His shifu was taking him flying again. Great winds roared for only a moment before silence returned. A sliver of the moon peeked through the clouds, nearly close enough to touch. Standing on clouds, Yin Biyue gazed at the sprawling landscape below.

The Sword Sage’s voice seemed to drift to him from afar. “Lao-si, when you take disciples riding on clouds in the future, remember to block the wind.”

Yin Biyue was taken aback. Riding the wind required at least a Second Sage level or above. He was nowhere near that. Yet his shifu spoke with such certainty. After a round of drinks and witnessing Yan Xing’s casual banter with their shifu, Yin Biyue felt much closer to the highly revered Sword Sage than before. His restraint faded.

“That’s still far in the future. When I have disciples, Master will become a grandmaster… How does one block wind? With a hand seal?”

The Sword Sage shook his head. “No. By then, a mere thought will chase it away.”

Of course I got owned, asking something like that. A noob like me could never understand an elite whose power level is over nine thousand.

The Sword Sage seemed to recall something funny. “The first time I took Jun Yu flying, I didn’t block the wind. Of course, *I* wasn’t cold. But your dashixiong ended up freezing.”

Yin Biyue pictured his chilly elder shixiong literally turning into ice. Even though the story sounded quite tragic, for some reason he laughed along with his master. “Shifu, be serious. How can Dashixiong fear the cold at his level of cultivation?”

“Don’t believe me? Jun Yu was small then, barely reached my waist. Lifting him was like picking up a kitten by the scruff. Hey, what’re you laughing at? It’s true. His cultivation was tiny. He didn’t even know how to speak up when he was cold…” The Sword Sage’s voice softened. “I’m not a good master. I don’t know how to teach. Never properly taught any of you…”

In the past, Yin Biyue had also considered his master a shoddy one. All he knew about him was that his cultivation was number one in the world—nothing else. Yin Biyue heard many stories about him, but they were just descriptions from others. He often wondered: *What kind of person is the Sword Sage?*

Then, at the foot of Mount Chongming, enlightenment had struck him, and he’d executed Broad Daylight. Through the curtain of rain, he’d glimpsed a figure so audacious that heaven yielded before his sundering strike. Yin Biyue had understood that mindset.

When Yin Biyue met his master for real, the Sword Sage had somehow defied all his imaginings. He was not detached and transcendent like Headmaster-xiansheng, who appeared to have a grasp on everything, nor was he as dignified as Liaoguan had first appeared. Although he constantly referred to himself as “this old fellow,” he was fond of wine and sleep, and his joy and anger were as vibrant as a young man’s.

Yin Biyue had found him unbelievable at first. After they drank together, it'd all clicked in his head. No rules dictated how a Sage should live.

"Shifu, it's true you never taught me much," he said with a smile. "Honestly, when I saw you at Xingshan Temple, I didn't recognize you at first. The portrait at the peak looks twenty years older."

"Well, doesn't it make me seem more mature?" the Sword Sage grumbled.

"At the time, I thought we were doomed. I thought not even a Daluo Golden Immortal[7] could save me and Luo-shixiong. But then you showed up and saved us."

"I was still too late…" Wei Jingfeng's voice was low.

Yin Biyue's smile fell away. "I didn't think so. Shifu, you don't know how to teach because your high talent makes cultivation almost instinctive. You're often absent because you're doing something monumental. It's not just me. I'm sure that Dashixiong, Ershijie, Sanshixiong, and Wushidi all believe the same."

The "monumental task" was a speculation, but the Sword Sage didn't deny it.

"You showed me a possibility," Yin Biyue continued. "Even if the path of cultivation is full of thorns and quagmires, even after living a long life, we needn't scheme or grow calculating. We need not become someone worn down by time. Sleep when you please, drink when you want, act on your heart's call… I envy that. But maybe I'll never live as you do, Shifu. Because you are the one and only Sword Sage Wei Jingfeng!"

Wei Jingfeng laughed heartily, his mirth shaking the skies. "Ha! You don't need to live as I do. You are the one and only Yin Biyue."

To be praised by a Sage made Yin Biyue blush.

Recalling his earlier words, the Sword Sage cringed at having sought comfort from his disciple. He waved a hand at the skies. "Let's go."

He grabbed Yin Biyue and leaped from the clouds.

The abrupt, weightless plunge made Yin Biyue scream at the top of his lungs. The wailing wind mixed with the Sword Sage's laughter, and Yin

Biyue's heart nearly jumped out of his throat.

Before he could summon his vital qi to protect him, the fall stopped.

Pale-faced, Yin Biyue gasped for breath. Distantly, he heard the Sword Sage speaking.

"Lao-si, wasn't that exciting? You see? Life is full of surprises."

I take back everything I said. This guy…

They were still amid the clouds; it wasn't real solid ground beneath their feet. From their vantage point, they could see a mountain range below. Night had deepened. The cold wind scattered mist from the peaks, and silvery light veiled the tallest summit. The radiance of an activated array was beautiful against the vast night sky.

Collecting himself, Yin Biyue noted the direction they had been traveling. "Are we at…the Hengduan Mountains?"

The Sword Sage replied with a noncommittal hum.

The Hengduan Mountains were the home of Baopu Sect. Baopu Sect had a great mountain-protection array. Although it wasn't one passed down for a million years like Xingshan Temple, it was integrated with the mountain's spiritual dragon vein. To activate it required an anchor of four elders at the Great Ascension level, with the Second Sage at the core to harness the mountain range's natural power.

Yin Biyue didn't know for sure why his master had brought him here but had an inkling. He wanted to see how he would breach an array at full strength. It must be an earth-shattering event.

The Sword Sage descended with him in tow. Nothing happened. They stopped at the summit as if it were their own backyard. Yin Biyue was stunned at first; then he thought it fitting. Sages should be like this: come and go as they please. What array could confine him?

They weren't alone on the summit. An elder stood upon the jagged rocks. With wind billowing his sleeves, he seemed to teeter, though he was as firm as the mountain itself.

Yu Shi glanced back and saw Wei Jingfeng, impassive.

In Yu Shi’s youth, he’d often thought he shouldn’t live in the same era as Wei Jingfeng. Without the Sword Sage in the way, he’d be the tallest peak in the world. From Hengduan’s highest summit, all lands lay beneath him. If he wished, he could see waves on the Floating Sea, bamboo towers on the Qinglu Mountains in the south, the abyss where no light touched in the Eastern Continent, and the sprawling golden rooftops of the Northern Imperial City. None stood taller than he.

But the Sword Sage had returned. Who would remember the world’s second-highest peak?

Yu Shi’s eyes chilled.

Wei Jingfeng ignored him and turned to his disciple instead. “See this old fool? Schemed plenty while I wasn’t around. You can’t beat him yet, so I’ll vent your anger for you. When you’re stronger, you’ll have to get back at him yourself.”

His tone was as casual as discussing what was for dinner. Yin Biyue was dumbstruck.

Yu Shi’s expression darkened further. His sleeves swelled with raging wind. The array’s radiance flared, as if the moon had fallen upon the Hengduan Mountains. Meanwhile, ominous clouds rolled in from above with a majestic aura. The looming shadow grew until Yin Biyue recognized its shape—a sword. A colossal sword shadow enveloped the entire mountain.

This was Yu Shi’s Eight Trigrams Sword.

But the Sword Sage didn’t draw his blade. The gale and the debris couldn’t reach him. He raised a hand and pointed idly. An effortless gesture.

One moment, he was drinking in the warm, fragrant Chunxiu Pavilion; the next, he was standing at the summit of Hengduan and attacking. The actions were identical in difficulty to Wei Jingfeng, except that the former was fun and the latter annoying.

The mirage of the giant sword shattered. The moon broke through the clouds. Yu Shi fell from the precipice of immeasurable height.

The Sword Sage turned around. “Let’s go.”

The moon was bright and the breeze refreshing—the same as when they'd arrived. Yin Biyue and his shifu rode on the wind.

"Shifu, is your business done?"

"Not yet."

"Where are we going now?"

"To the Central Continent."

Yin Biyue thought this might have been the most dramatic, tumultuous night of his life. By the time it was done, maybe he'd meet every prominent figure in the world.

Chapter 69

LIU QISHUANG HAD overcome countless obstacles as she'd traveled from the Northern Continent. The dust of the three-thousand-mile journey clung to her sleeves as she moved with the stars at her back.

Now that she'd reached the Central Continent, she intended to rest briefly before continuing to the Cangya Mountains. Recalling that in a recent letter, Yan Xing had mentioned returning soon, she stopped by the Fenglai Pavilion near Lanyuan Academy to purchase four taels of Flowing Twilight Brew, bottled into a jug for easy transport.

It was late at night by the time she left the tavern. While looking for an inn, she noticed she was being followed. She deliberately turned into a secluded alley, winding through twists and turns, yet the eyes on her persistently remained.

The other party was strong. Much stronger than any of the overt or covert assassins she had encountered while escorting Duan Chongxuan back to the Northern Continent.

Her intuition for danger was heightened to the extreme, though her expression stayed neutral. She walked deep into a long-abandoned alley, deserted and overgrown with weeds. The more secluded the place, the more clearly she could sense the trailing presence.

Liu Qishuang did not use a sword or a saber. She practiced the art of the fist. No intricate swordplay, only raw and furious fist intent pumped with vital qi. Straightforward and direct. Meeting force with force.

She leaped onto a rooftop and threw a punch. The force of her fist tore through the air, and a sound like thunder exploded in all directions. This thunder was inaudible to ordinary folks; it resonated only within the consciousness of cultivators.

She held nothing back. From the first move, she'd used her strongest attack, because she knew the gap between her and her opponent was like heaven and earth. Only this could offer her a shot at survival.

Her fist met empty air—the worst case scenario. Her heart sank. Before she could strike again, a figure in white drifted down before her.

“Qishuang, you’ve improved quite a bit!” The Sword Sage laughed heartily.

***

AT THE MENTION OF COMING to the Central Continent, Yin Biyue had first assumed his master intended to meet Headmaster-xiansheng. However, the first person they’d encountered hadn’t been the headmaster, but his second shijie. Just like when they had run into Yan Xing at Chunxiu Pavilion, he couldn’t tell if this was a coincidence or his master’s deliberate arrangement.

“Shifu?!”

Yin Biyue had never seen Liu Qishuang surprised. He was amazed to discover his somber and sharp-edged shijie could look as adorable as a young maiden.

“Shifu, Sishidi, it’s you two? I thought…” Liu Qishuang trailed off and smiled.

“You thought that mess with Lao-wu wasn’t over yet!” Wei Jingfeng finished for her.

Liu Qishuang turned serious. “I escorted Wushidi back home. The situation in the Northern Continent is somewhat tense. Thankfully, there’s been no change in rulership.”

“Family affairs are the hardest to untangle,” Wei Jingfeng said with a sigh. “As long as his father is fine, he’ll be fine. Don’t worry too much. He needs to figure this out on his own.”

The Northern Continent was the Duan clan’s domain. Any change in rulership was a family affair. Not even the Sword Sage could intervene, unless Duan Chongxuan outright declared, *I quit! I’m going back to Cangya to devote myself to cultivation. Imperial power and rule have nothing to do with me anymore.*

However, some responsibilities were borne from birth, and certain honors that had to be protected were etched in bone and flesh. Such things were never settled with words.

Back at the Cangya Mountains, Yin Biyue had heard from Jun Yu that Liu Qishuang had gone to the Floating Sea to escort Duan Chongxuan home. At the time, he assumed that with her and the cyan-winged luan, the journey would be smooth, not fraught with peril.

Either way, their shifu was right. Duan Chongxuan would have to handle these matters himself.

“What are we doing standing around?” Wei Jingfeng hopped down from the roof and strode toward the street. “Let’s find somewhere comfortable to sleep.”

Yin Biyue and Liu Qishuang followed. By now, they didn’t find it strange that a Sage wanted to sleep.

Wei Jingfeng passed four inns without entering any of them. As the night deepened and pedestrians dwindled, shops started to close up. He stopped in the empty street and looked around with a flat face. Not finding a satisfactory place to sleep had him looking like a child denied a lollipop.

Finally, they stopped at a small door. It was deep in a back alley where yellowed weeds grew waist-high. The vermilion paint on the door was peeling, and the doorway was only wide enough for one person to pass at a time. This was clearly some household’s back door.

The Sword Sage stood before the door and raised his hand. Before he could knock, he dropped it back to his side.

This was the first time Yin Biyue saw his master hesitate.

The door was not covered with any arrays; a gentle push would open it. Even if it were, how could it stop a Sage?

In the end, he turned around and said to Yin Biyue, “You have many questions I haven’t answered. If you want, go in and ask.”

Yin Biyue was shocked. “This is…?”

“Yes.”

Yin Biyue understood what lay beyond this door. Who would've guessed the academy had a back door, and one that the Sword Sage was familiar with. Headmaster-xiansheng had probably seen or predicted their arrival and was waiting in the courtyard.

"Are you coming too?"

Wei Jingfeng walked out of the alley with Liu Qishuang. "It's been a long time since I've seen your shijie. We'll find a place to chat." He paused. That sounded like he was making excuses, so he gave an honest addendum. "Last time I was here, Li Tugen schemed against me, and I struck back and injured him. Neither of us believes we were at fault… He may not want to see me at the moment…"

His voice trailed off in the second half, but Yin Biyue didn't really notice—because all his attention was seized by one thing:

Li Tugen!

Li! Earth! Root!

Headmaster-xiansheng's name is Li Earth Root!

Ha ha ha, no wonder people call him Xiansheng instead of his name!

Oh crap, will I be silenced for knowing this secret? Shifu, I'm scared. QAQ

He wanted to drag his master inside with him, but when he turned back, Liu Qishuang and Wei Jingfeng had already vanished.

The door before him creaked open. Yin Biyue bowed toward the empty doorway as a greeting to the owner of this place. Outside the courtyard, withered leaves drifted, but the foliage of locust trees inside was still as abundant as in midsummer. Even so, the autumn wind was chilly, and the cold lingered.

After passing through the small gate, he walked beneath the dense locust trees and along the winding corridor until he saw the man sitting in the courtyard. Li Earth Root—No! Headmaster-xiansheng was reading a book, accompanied by the flickering light of an oil lamp and the clear, bright moonlight. His array disc was broken, his teacup shattered, and the millions of tomes in the academy's library were already committed to his

memory. Fortunately, there were still books in this world he hadn't read to keep him occupied.

He set down his book and smiled at the newcomer. "I have no good tea to serve you. My apologies. Come, sit."

Yin Biyue approached and took a seat. "It is my fault. Visiting at night is already an imposition. Forgive my rudeness."

Xiansheng waved his hand, his face as gentle as always, signaling that formalities were unnecessary. The stone table hadn't changed and neither had the locust tree. But Yin Biyue noticed that the headmaster seemed to have aged. The lines around his eyes were deeper, and strands of white now mixed with his darker locks, starkly visible under the moonlight. What could cause a Second Sage's life force to deplete so rapidly?

He recalled his master saying Xiansheng had schemed against him. The headmaster must have paid a hefty price.

"What questions do you have for me?" Xiansheng smiled.

Yin Biyue had many things he wanted to ask. Why, during their stargazing session last time, had he been told to go south? Had the headmaster foreseen the events at Xingshan Temple? How much had he been involved? How could he be so certain that Luo-shixiong was the Demon Lord's reincarnation? Had Yin Biyue been sent to kill Luo Mingchuan because he himself was also special? And what was the monumental task his master was currently undertaking?

His gut told him Headmaster-xiansheng could answer every one of these questions. But he was acting so open and candid that it left Yin Biyue unsure where to even begin.

Xiansheng stood up. "No rush. Think carefully. The things you want to ask me… Do you not know the answers yourself?"

He walked up to Yin Biyue and looked him in the eye—then, the headmaster raised his hand and patted Yin Biyue lightly on the shoulder.

Rumble!

His consciousness jolted. The library deep in the night, Zhengyi Hall under the setting sun, the Hall of Debate in the faint light of dawn, the woods where he'd practiced the sword, the terrace where he'd gazed into

the distance… Countless images flashed before his eyes like an animated, revolving lantern.

Before his first visit to Headmaster-xiansheng, he had fallen into a mysterious state. In it, he'd remembered the three years his original self had spent at the academy. The experience had broken through his mental obstructions and set him back on the path of the sword. Only the memories of the night of his graduation had remained blurred. He had a feeling there was something important there, but he hadn't been able to remember it.

Until now, when he finally saw everything clearly.

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YIN BIYUE'S PEERS had celebrated all night at the Water Lotus Pavilion, drinking and singing in drunken revelry. He, meanwhile, was summoned by Headmaster-xiansheng to observe the stars.

The wind rustled the locust leaves, and the heavens shimmered brilliantly.

"What do you see?"

"Stars."

"Look closer." Xiansheng patted Yin Biyue's shoulder again.

He focused his gaze, seeing farther and deeper, and the universe seemed to draw infinitely closer. It was close enough to view the icy blue frost on the surface of one star and the erupting black flames of another. The galaxy might be enormous, but these two stars shone the brightest. He knew these were the ones Headmaster-xiansheng wanted him to see.

"I don't understand."

Xiansheng poured a cup of tea. Faint light reflected in the cup. "Two stars appear. The dragon and the serpent clash. Life and death within the same gate, only one shall live."

***

AND SO, INSTEAD OF BECOMING an official on the Northern Continent, Yin Biyue had entered the Cangya Mountains alongside Luo Mingchuan.

And so, there had been the painstakingly laid killing array and ambush in the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament. And, consequently, the conversation in the Cangya Dungeon.

On this night, Yin Biyue saw all the cause and effect laid bare before him. A chill ran down his spine.

“The two of you are each other’s nemeses. In my view, if there is anyone in this world who can kill him, it is you. Otherwise, even if his physical body perishes, as long as his star remains and his soul is undispersed, he will be reborn through the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.” Headmaster-xiansheng paused. “But your master doesn’t see it that way. He wants the two of you to try to defy the heavens and rewrite fate.”

“I won’t kill Shixiong, no matter what,” Yin Biyue stated softly but firmly.

Headmaster-xiansheng smiled. “I know. At first, I thought this path was doomed. After meeting you, I realized Wei Jingfei might be right. Let’s give it a try.”

Yin Biyue felt his eyes sting. Whether Xingshan Temple or Baopu Sect, Lanyuan Academy or Jiekong Temple—even if the whole world doubted him, his master stood by his side, unwavering. Even before they met, his master chose to believe in him. This trust was blind, and thus all the more precious.

“As long as you understand. This old fellow is always right.” A youthful voice drifted over on the night breeze. The remark was directed at Headmaster-xiansheng.

The Sword Sage hopped down from the distant library’s eaves and landed in the courtyard.

Xiansheng shook his head. “Eavesdropping is very impolite. You didn’t even use the back door.”

“Shifu…” Yin Biyue’s mouth stayed open, though he didn’t know how to begin. He wanted to thank his master for his trust, for the fortune of having met him.

The Sword Sage waved him off. “We’ll leave tomorrow. I want some sleep first.”

He passed through the gated pergola and pushed open the door to a side chamber with familiar ease.

***

AT THE HOUR OF THE ROOSTER’S CROW, Cangya’s bell tolled seven times. Thousands of disciples rushed to gather before Qinghe Hall.

The sect leader Zhengyangzi and Cangya’s chief disciple Luo Mingchuan stood atop the stone steps of the hall, looking down at the sea of familiar faces below. Some were grave, resolute and solemn, while others were youthful and tender. The Northern Continent was troubled.

Disciples stationed at the border had reported that at least three to four hundred demonic cultivators had crossed the Floating Sea. Their numbers were unprecedented. Remote villages along the border had already met disaster. Minor noble clans lacked the strength to resist, and many refugees fled toward the Cangya Mountains and Baopu Sect, seeking the protection of the major sects.

Most Cangya disciples had heard the news. Now, assembled at the sound of the bell, they awaited the sect’s orders to descend the mountain and eradicate evil.

Luo Mingchuan’s voice boomed far and wide: “We, the disciples of Cangya, seek the Great Dao with sincere and righteous hearts. For the ten thousand years since our sect’s founding, our purpose has never wavered. Now, demonic cultivators run rampant, bringing calamity to the land. How can we shut our gates and turn a blind eye?”

Emotions ran high among the Cangya disciples, and they raised their swords with a roar. “We cannot!”

“Good! All disciples in the Spirit Concentration level and above, follow me down the mountain!” A sea of swords and chorus of cheers rose as one in response to Luo Mingchuan’s declaration. “Down the mountain! Slay the demons!”

Seeing Luo Mingchuan take charge on his own, Zhengyangzi felt his disciple had truly grown up. It pleased him, but he sighed nonetheless. “Be careful in everything you do.”

His words were drowned in the roaring tide of cheers. But Luo Mingchuan heard, and bowed solemnly.

“Do not worry, Shifu.”

Chapter 70

THE AUTUMN SUNLIGHT was clear and bright. The sky was a dazzling peacock blue, with faint wispy clouds stretching across it, and the sun's rays radiated through their gaps. When Yin Biyue stepped out of the academy he was holding three books. Headmaster-xiansheng stood at the back door to see him off.

Just like Wei Jingfeng, Yin Biyue had stayed at the academy last night. When he awoke in the morning, his master was still asleep. Only Headmaster-xiansheng was in the yard, reading a book. His cassis-purple sleeves, expansive and thin, fluttered lightly in the autumn breeze as he turned the pages. When Yin Biyue walked out to greet him, he smiled.

"I have a few rare books here that I've just finished studying. They are quite interesting. You can read them in your spare time."

Yin Biyue was a little surprised. It was common knowledge that Headmaster-xiansheng had mastered all ancient and modern texts. There were millions of tomes stored in his head. Some even believed there were no books left in the world that he hadn't read. What could a man who could traverse space with his seal and calculate the orbits of stars still have to learn or question? How to invent new magic? The end of time? The balance within spatial distortions? How to cross the barriers of the billionfold worlds of the trichiliocosm?[8]

Headmaster-xiansheng pulled out a few yellowed, thin booklets from his sleeve. Yin Biyue accepted them with both hands, his fingers trembling slightly.

The Enchanting Immortal Lord and the Cold, Lovely Consort.

Uh…

The hell was this?

My Encounter with the Gorgeous Immortal Husband, Domineering Immortal Master, Let Me Go, The Cold-Hearted Shizun Fell for Me.

And it was a friggin’ series?!

The scholar’s lips curled upward in a smile as profound and all-encompassing as the ocean. “Young man, read them well.”

Yin Biyue almost lost his mind. He nearly pounced on Mister Li Earth Root and grabbed his hands. *“Heaven’s King Covers Earthly Tiger—OP is an idiot!”*[9] *Please, tell me you’re from another world like me!*

In the end, Yin Biyue tucked the books in his sleeves and bent in a proper disciple’s bow. Xiansheng’s smile looked the same as always, as if he had merely picked up some amusing storybooks from the market and gifted them to a junior. What else could Yin Biyue do?

The Sword Sage emerged from his room. “Qishuang went back to Cangya last night,” he said to Yin Biyue. “We’ll leave today.”

Yin Biyue sensed his master wanted to say something more to Headmaster-xiansheng, but even after they walked out the door, he never looked back.

The headmaster watched as they left the back alley, their figures gradually swallowed by the bustling crowd on the main street.

Wei Jingfeng bought two horses and led Yin Biyue west out of Chengyang Pass, heading straight for the Floating Sea.

The autumn wind rises, white clouds glide by;

Grass and trees yellow, geese southward fly.[10]

They traveled at a leisurely pace, pausing now and then like two young noblemen on an autumn pleasure trip through the Central Continent. Wei Jingfeng knew which night markets had the best food, which brothels employed the most beautiful ladies, which taverns didn’t water down the wine, and, now that autumn had arrived, which lake held the plumpest crabs. He told his disciple about it all.

Occasionally, he would share a fun anecdote about his youth, but most of the time, he watched Yin Biyue practice the sword. He didn’t talk when his disciple trained because he genuinely didn’t know how to teach. When the mood struck him, he’d snap off a tree branch and spar with Yin Biyue.

Yin Biyue always got totally owned.

The Sword Sage laughed heartily every time. “Your dashixiong went through the same thing. To learn how to fight, you first have to learn how to take a beating!”

Yin Biyue felt bad for Jun Yu. As the first disciple of Xihua Peak, he must’ve taken plenty of beatings from this max-level elite player who didn’t know how to hold back and didn’t have a drop of coaching experience.

At first, Yin Biyue thought his master had no destination in mind and was just wandering wherever the road took them, until they reached the sea.

The salty sea breeze carried the same clamor of the docks as the Western Continent’s Xian Harbor. Ships boarding and disembarking, cargo loading and unloading, the calls of sailors raising anchor mingled with the shouts of farewells. The sounds were heavy with nostalgia as they rang out. Yin Biyue was dazed for a moment. It was as if his travels with Luo Mingchuan and Duan Chongxuan had been only yesterday, only now they were all on different continents.

Yin Biyue and Wei Jingfeng boarded a ship, joining a merchant convoy bound for the Eastern Continent.

The Eastern Continent was isolated and overrun with demonic cultivators, though parts of it were also divided among a few cultivator factions. The profits from a round-trip trade run were enormous. Men died for wealth, birds died for food—there were always merchant companies willing to take the risk.

The Sword Sage’s current identity was a third-generation Cangya disciple. Both he and Yin Biyue were at the Breakthrough level, so they didn’t have to pay for passage. Instead, they assisted in escorting the convoy during the voyage, protecting it from sea beasts and pirates.

This was Yin Biyue’s first time crossing the vast ocean of this part of the world. White seabirds skimmed the horizon where sky met water. The great ship activated its arrays to plow through terrifying tidal waves of hurricanes and sea beasts of all kinds, some docile, some vicious. The golden glow of sunrise and sunset stretched out for miles; the salty night winds and boundless silver moonlight caressed the ship’s bow.

The ship sailed on, day and night alternating. The Sword Sage played pai gow[11] and told raunchy jokes with the sailors on deck. When he lost, he

screamed curses at the top of his lungs. He even taught his disciple how to play.

At sea, Yin Biyue didn't obsess over every second of cultivation, but his mind broadened, which hastened his development. He didn't know why his master was going to the Eastern Continent, and he didn't ask.

Seven days later, he broke through to the Small Ascension level. Finally, he realized that the legends of his shixiong Yan Xing achieving a breakthrough while wandering in the wilderness were not exaggerated.

They disembarked once they reached the Eastern Continent and parted ways with the merchant convoy. The ship's captain even clapped the Sword Sage on the shoulder with an offer: "Hey buddy, after you're done with your apprenticeship, come work for my fleet! I got good food and good drinks. If I get a bite, you get one too. You'll earn a hundred thousand spirit stones in one trip. You won't have to worry about buying a house or finding a wife, ha ha ha!"

Yin Biyue was flustered, but Wei Jingfeng's response was casual and friendly. "Thanks bro. May your business prosper and wealth flow endlessly!"

The port had been desolate, with only a few ships moored, but the fresh arrival of a merchant convoy brought it to life. Yin Biyue followed his master in the direction of the crowd. The unfamiliar accents around him made him feel like a stranger in a foreign land. He had a strange feeling that Wei Jingfeng knew the way well. He seemed to wander aimlessly, but his gaze was firm.

The skies above burned like fire as the sun set over the wastelands. They walked through barren plains where lone birds rode the strong wind. In the distance, they could faintly see snowy peaks shrouded in mist at the edge of the horizon, though that didn't mean they were close. They were still a long way away from the snow plains that surrounded the mountains, but because the peaks were so tall, they could be seen from any open vantage point on the continent.

Atop those peaks stood the once-glorious palace of the Demonic Dominion that had been built a million years ago. Now, it was occupied by Jin Palace, the strongest of the Twelve Palaces from that time. The Wuyin Snow Plains and the Tongtian Snow Peaks—Yin Biyue had read about them

many times. It was harder for birds to cross them than to ascend into the heavens.

The Sword Sage followed Yin Biyue's gaze and narrowed his eyes.

"Ever seen a demonic cultivator before?"

"Twice. In Ye City and the Tixiang Mountains in the Southern Continent."

"Ever fought one?"

Yin Biyue nodded, though when he recalled his awful performance at the time, he felt a bit embarrassed.

"What do you think are the differences between demonic cultivators and us?"

Yin Biyue suspected his master was testing him. "Those of us who cultivate transform the spiritual energy of the natural world into our own vital qi. In the process of breathing, we inhale life energy and exhale death energy. Such is the continuous cycle of life. As for demonic cultivators, they are said to have no restrictions. They absorb both life and death energy indiscriminately, and even devour the flesh and blood of living beings or the baleful energy of corpses to convert into demonic qi…"

He had never seen a demonic cultivator train, so it was little wonder he sounded like he was reciting a textbook.

Wei Jingfeng hummed. "Correct. But demonic cultivators are also divided into two types. Upon entry to their sect, the disciples of the Twelve Palaces have their meridians shattered by their elders, and are forcibly infused with demonic qi. After their meridians regenerate, their physical resilience can increase up to tenfold. Those willing to endure greater pain may have their bones and skin reforged. With the structure of their human bodies altered, they no longer consider themselves human. They often call themselves the 'Demon Race.'"

Yin Biyue frowned. Normal cultivators' physiques and senses also evolved with their levels, but not to the point that they rejected their humanity.

The Sword Sage seemed to know what he was thinking. "If you'd seen those thrown down the cliffs and struggling to survive, their meridians

shattered, but still fighting each other for the right to enter the Demonic Palaces, you'd understand."

Yin Biyue fell silent. Most people believed demonic cultivators were cruel and bloodthirsty because of their unorthodox cultivation methods, but the Sword Sage saw deeper. The Eastern Continent's resources were scarce, its factions divided. The strong preyed on the weak, with no dominant sect to establish order. To cultivate here, to seek the strength to survive, was to live in endless competition. It was a perpetual test of their humanity. Over time, those who lived here adapted to this way of life, and the Eastern Continent grew more isolated.

"Shifu, you know the Eastern Continent well?" Yin Biyue asked casually, assuming the Sword Sage, having roamed for years, knew every corner of the world. It wasn't strange that he knew how the Twelve Palaces recruited disciples.

"Of course," Wei Jingfeng replied. "I was born on the Eastern Continent. Same village as Li Tugen."

Yin Biyue choked.

The Sword Sage continued explaining about the types of demonic cultivators as if he hadn't just dropped hidden lore. "The other type has no sect. They learn through trial and error. They have no support, but likewise, no restraints. They specialize in killing for treasure, living by plunder. They care nothing for consequences and fear no death."

"Terrifying," Yin Biyue said.

Unafraid to kill or die, unbound by any rules, let alone morals or conscience. He couldn't help but think that facing such an opponent, even at the same level, would be difficult.

The Sword Sage nodded. "Yes, terrifying indeed… Look, here comes one now!"

Yin Biyue stopped in his tracks and whirled around. Amid the waist-high wild grass, a pair of eyes stared straight at him. Devoid of emotion, skilled in concealment, brimming with patience—these were the eyes of a predator locked onto prey.

A bone-deep chill ran down his spine. Had the Sword Sage not pointed those eyes out, he never would have noticed them. If he'd been alone, he might have fallen to an ambush and wound up severely wounded or dead.

Yin Biyue set his hand on his sword hilt. The figure in the grass still hadn't moved. For a moment, only the sound of wind filled the wilderness. He suspected the other party was probing him or gathering strength for a lethal strike.

The Sword Sage suddenly spoke in Yin Biyue's ear. With the Sword Sage present, their conversation naturally couldn't be overheard.

"This isn't the Flower-Plucking Tournament. This is a real life-or-death fight. If you die, even your rune-inscribed robes will be taken and sold on the black market. Combat doesn't require courtesy. Killing has no need for aesthetics. Raise your sword and either sever your opponent's head or pierce their heart.

"Can you do it?"

"I never learned how," Yin Biyue replied. He didn't know if he could do as his master said.

The Sword Sage sighed. "This old fellow never taught it, because it's a sword art meant for killing. But you need to learn it."

This world also needed him to learn it.

Yin Biyue noticed the grass quiver almost imperceptibly. It wasn't from the wind. The demonic cultivator's probing had ended. Their patience had run out.

The Sword Sage took two steps back, positioning himself behind his disciple. Somehow, the cultivation level he now radiated was only at the Spirit Concentration level, as if blatantly telling the enemy, *I'm very weak, and he's very strong. He'll protect me.*

With no choice, Yin Biyue braced himself, stepped forward, and drew his sword.

Chapter 71

YIN BIYUE MANAGED TO UNSHEATHE Yihu half an inch before the shadow in the grass lunged. It had been coiled to strike for a long time; it would never give him a chance to seize the initiative.

The withered grass across the wastelands bent violently downward as the demonic cultivator struck out with a palm toward Yin Biyue's right shoulder. A tremendous demonic qi surged, crashing down on him. Yin Biyue braced himself, and Yihu—still sheathed—hummed when it clashed against the demonic qi. A metallic glint flickered, then a dagger shot out from the enemy's sleeve, aimed straight at his face. The sharp gleam stung his eyes for only an instant. Yin Biyue twisted his wrist, shifting Yihu from a block to a thrust, deflecting the dagger. Even so, he staggered back two steps before he finally got a clear look at the shadow.

Unlike the two pale-skinned demonic cultivators he'd encountered on the Southern Continent, this one was wrapped firmly in black cloth, revealing only a pair of cold, sharp eyes. His cultivation level and strength were also concealed.

It would be much later when Yin Biyue learned that people dressed like this had a collective name: Hunters of the Wasteland. They lived, wandered, and plundered across the barren land, preying on lone travelers. They were skilled in combat. After observing patiently in ambush and assessing their prey's strength, they'd go in for a one-hit kill.

But the hunter's sudden attack had failed to kill Yin Biyue, so now his presence was exposed. Past experience dictated he should flee at the fastest speed possible. However, the two rich men in front of him were wearing exquisitely crafted robes and carried themselves with an ignorance of the world. If he was successful in this hunt, he'd be fed for half a year. It was a worthwhile endeavor. He wouldn't run.

Yin Biyue didn't know the hunter's thoughts. In truth, only a moment had passed from raising his sword to deflecting the dagger. The fact that he hadn't drawn Yihu in time flustered him, but he quickly steadied himself.

He used Treading Lands to make his short retreat, and the extreme speed bought him some time.

He leaped high and unsheathed Yihu with a resounding ring. Along with a piercing cry that echoed across the wastelands, he descended upon the hunter like a bird diving into the forest. Though he was in midair, the withered grass below parted in two, splitting a path that extended a hundred feet in either direction. His sword qi crashed like ocean waves. This was the Cangya Sword technique, Crane Cry Above Clouds.

He was now a Small Ascensioner, his vital qi and sword art incomparable to before. The power of this strike surpassed what he had unleashed at the Flower-Plucking Tournament tenfold. The moment he struck, Yin Biyue's mind calculated a hundred possible counterattacks from the hunter, and even predicted an additional twenty moves of his own. He failed to consider that the hunter would ignore his attack altogether.

The dagger sliced through the air toward Yin Biyue's throat, like a farmer's scythe cutting through weeds, clean and efficient. As an attack it was simple and fast. Its trajectory left a black arc of light. The hunter was confident he was faster than Yin Biyue, or at least just as fast. If Yin Biyue's sword pierced his heart, he would slit Yin Biyue's throat in return.

Tsss.

White vapor hissed from the dagger's edge. It was the sound of a Small Ascension cultivator's protective vital qi being breached.

The dagger missed Yin Biyue by a hair's breadth, but he felt a chill crawl down his spine. Even if his sword had pierced half an inch from the hunter's heart, he had been forced to alter his stance. He pulled back to defend himself, feeling afraid.

This was what the Sword Sage had meant: a true life-or-death fight. The hunter's willingness to trade injury for injury, to fight without regard for his own life, was completely different from the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Faced with an enemy who feared no death, intricate sword techniques and calculations lost their meaning.

Yin Biyue landed on the ground. The hunter gave him no chance to catch his breath. The dagger's black arc split the air, its paths forming fine

lines. The yellowed grass was sliced where the lines passed, the cuts clean and even, their severed ends dancing wildly in the autumn wind.

The dagger's trajectories formed a net, cutting through the space of the wasteland. This was the hunter's net. Yin Biyue was trapped within it, unable to advance or retreat.

Clang-clang-clang-clang—

A rapid, grating cacophony of clashes resounded. Yihu met every line, striking the dagger countless times. Then, Yin Biyue thrust his sword straight into the earth under his feet. The ground split open as countless strings of sword qi burst up around him and broke apart the massive black net. He pulled his sword free, sending mud and shattered rocks flying in all directions. A sudden chill spread, and frost formed in thick layers over the grass.

The Coldwater Blade!

The hunter lunged forward with his dagger, ready to clash with Yin Biyue head-on. He was certain his strike would break the hunter's dagger, because no one understood Yihu's sharpness and durability better than he did. But the dagger did not fall.

No, the hunter suddenly hurled the dagger with his right hand straight at Yin Biyue's face instead, and a long saber appeared in his left, slashing horizontally toward Yin Biyue's waist. A saber hidden up his sleeve! The enemy had never said he carried only a dagger. No matter how favorable the situation first seemed, letting the hunter close the distance had been a foolish move.

Tsss!

Steam rose again; Yin Biyue's protective vital qi had shattered. The method was shameless but effective. He managed to deflect the lightning-fast dagger but couldn't fully guard against the saber in time. It moved so quickly that, despite its light demonic qi, it still breached his protective vital qi. A thin line of blood seeped through his robes. At least he changed his stance fast enough that he managed to avoid being bisected at the waist.

From the start of the fight until this moment, though both sides had exchanged many moves, only a few minutes had passed. Yet in that short time, Yin Biyue found himself pushed to the brink of death twice. It

reminded him of his experience in the dark cave of the Tixiang Mountains. If his shixiong were here, he'd still just be a deadweight.

This really sucks!

Even though he'd been personally instructed by the world's only Sword Sage. Even though he had attained the Small Ascension level. He hadn't improved at all.

Yin Biyue sealed the wound at his waist with vital qi, his expression grim and motionless as stagnant water.

The saber cleaved through the air. A tremendous demonic qi centered on the blade exploded across the wastelands, then fell like rain, shredding all in its path to pieces. The hunter finally unleashed his strongest attack, certain that his wounded opponent had been rattled by the recent hit.

If Yin Biyue chose to strike, he couldn't evade the saber. If he retreated, he wouldn't be able to stop retreating. He chose to do neither and sidestepped the blow, thrusting his sword forward as he did. Fierce vital qi poured forth, but the attack was not Broad Daylight. He lunged against the saber's edge, his robes fluttering wildly. No sword glares, no sword cries—only pent-up frustration, all released in a single slash. Yihu resonated with its master's will and let out a long cry that echoed across heaven and earth. The autumn wind fell silent. Yihu's moan was the only sound in the wasteland.

The Sword Sage's eyes flickered with surprise from where he stood far behind the fight. This was the first time since the fight began that he showed any reaction.

A breath later, saber and sword both plunged into their opponents' bodies. The hunter saw using demonic qi to protect himself as a waste and took the blow head-on. Meanwhile, Yin Biyue had poured all of his vital qi into the strike. There was only silence and the splatter of blood.

Blood, black and red, blossomed in the air like fireworks.

The hunter's face was frozen in shock. He didn't understand how his opponent's sword had been faster. Where had he gone wrong?

Yin Biyue pulled his sword free. The dead demonic cultivator fell backward, crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust. The long saber also fell

from Yin Biyue's body. It had stopped just an inch from his heart. Blood streamed down the sword's length, and the air grew thick with the smell of it.

The Sword Sage stepped forward.

"Shifu, I didn't do well…" Yin Biyue looked forlorn. "Our levels were similar, but I almost lost."

The Sword Sage patted his shoulder. "There is no winning or losing, only living or dying."

There was one more thing Wei Jingfeng didn't say: The hunter's cultivation had actually been higher than his disciple's. It was just that demonic cultivation was unique and its auras weren't as easy to discern.

All Yin Biyue's frustrations and confusion dissipated after he received the encouraging pat from his shifu. He laughed with fresh lightness. The flames of the setting sun burned over the wasteland, illuminating his bloodstained white hair and brows.

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LUO MINGCHUAN HAD BEEN at the border of the Western Continent for seven days. In this time, he'd led over three hundred Cangya disciples down the mountain. They split along the way—one group escorted refugees north while the other continued westward with him to slay evil.

Traces of demonic cultivators rampaging were everywhere along their path. They clashed with a few here and there but had yet to encounter a main force. Until they entered a small town.

The town had never been prosperous, but now it was completely deserted. Not even chickens or dogs roamed the empty alleyways. The streets were littered with lost bundles and belongings, evidence of the townspeople's frantic flight. Fortunately, there were no corpses or blood. The residents must have received warning in time. Nevertheless, the town brimmed with demonic qi, and demonic cultivators still lurked in the shadows. Luo Mingchuan's group was at a disadvantage in the open.

“Stay vigilant at all times. Keep the group together. I’ll scout from above,” he instructed, then vaulted toward the town’s watchtower.

He had always held authority among the disciples. During their journey, no one objected to any of his arrangements. Experience told them his decisions were the most practical and effective.

As he gazed down from the tower, the desolate town sprawled beneath him. Compared to the Ghara Pupil Technique, using his senses seemed almost useless. He didn’t need to ascend to a high vantage point, but he wanted to avoid suspicion about his methods. This was the first time since descending the mountain that he would use the pupil technique. He didn’t want to rely on it any more than necessary.

With the technique’s power, the demonic cultivators’ traces became visible to him. At least a dozen were gathered in a large manor to the east. They knew a concealment technique that could mask their presence from normal spiritual probing. Such exquisite stealth suggested they belonged to the Bi Palace of the Twelve Palaces.

Luo Mingchuan focused his gaze, then suddenly stumbled back a step. He moved swiftly, but as soon as his foot left the ground, the spot where he’d once stood exploded.

The entire tower rocked. Enemy figures materialized from the smoke as it faded. There were five of them, their cultivation levels indiscernible. They blocked all paths of retreat.

The Cangya disciples reacted immediately; some were already rushing toward the tower.

“Stay there! Stay on guard!” Luo Mingchuan shouted to them as he struck back.

It was too late. Agonized screams rose from the group. Their attention had been distracted by the explosion, and they’d missed the demonic cultivators slipping into their midst.

The golden light of a Great Buddhist Mudra flared atop the tower. This was the fastest way to break free of the encirclement. Two enemies blocking his path were blasted away, but the remaining three swiftly regrouped.

One among the demonic cultivators had higher cultivation, and the other two deferred to him. Luo Mingchuan would handle him first. Chenzhou left its sheath with a clear ring and drew a sharp arc of sword qi. The tower split beneath Luo Mingchuan's feet, and cracks spiderwebbed outward as shattered stone and dust burst into the air. Rather than fall, the debris gathered around his sword as if alive and shot toward the enemy along with the blade.

Like a thousand swords.

The two demonic cultivators condensed their demonic qi into a tangible wall that shielded the one in the center. The man's hands moved rapidly, forming seals. Thousands of swords made of demonic qi materialized in the air. They shot toward the debris, and the tens of thousands of blades clashed in a deafening hum. Luo Mingchuan, desperate to descend and help the Cangya disciples, held nothing back.

Boom!

The wall of demonic qi crumbled. Sword qi ran rampant, and the two demonic cultivators suffered violent backlash. Their hearts were crushed on the spot. The fragile watchtower, unable to bear the strain, collapsed. Amid clouds of dust, the leader hovered in the air, still forming seals. Unaffected by the loss of his allies, he didn't flinch. Swords continued to manifest around him.

Luo Mingchuan's heart sank. He had underestimated his enemy's strength and reaction. There was no time to start another sword momentum, but his gaze could move faster than the sword. His pupils contracted. The thousands of demonic qi swords before him shattered inch by inch. This bought him time to strike. Chenzhou broke through the encirclement and fell upon the enemy.

However, the enemy abruptly withdrew his seals, his face twisting in shock as he allowed the rubble to pierce his body. Blood gushed from his injuries. The longsword drove into his heart, and as it did, he stared into Luo Mingchuan's eyes.

"My Lord…!"

Then, he plunged from the sky and crashed into the tower wreckage.

Chapter 72

THE HOUR WAS LATE. The flickering yellow candlelight fell upon He Yanyun's delicate features, illuminating the crease between her brows and the worry in her eyes. She was distressed, unable to settle into meditation or focus on cultivation.

Ruan Xiaolian opened her eyes from where she'd been meditating on the bed and rose to close the window. She sat down beside her friend.

"What's wrong? You've been restless all evening…"

He Yanyun snapped out of it and forced a smile. "It's nothing. Maybe I'm just tired from today."

Ruan Xiaolian knew something was weighing on He Yanyun, but if she didn't want to talk, Ruan Xiaolian wouldn't press further. Instead, she offered a distraction. "The moon is full tonight. Let's go out for a stroll."

The two girls stepped out into the courtyard and leaped lightly onto the rooftop.

The town lay empty below. The Cangya disciples had repaired several abandoned houses to rest in, regroup, and recover for the night. They would leave in the morning for the next village, to check for any lingering demonic cultivators in the Western Continent. The fierce fight during the day had been unexpected. No one would've guessed that such an unremarkable town would harbor over forty demonic cultivators. Thankfully, Luo-shixiong had reacted swiftly, and no one in their group had been seriously hurt.

Under the cold moonlight, the dark wreckage of the watchtower sat nearby. He Yanyun thought back to the events of the day. It felt as if the battle were still unfolding before her eyes.

Her talent in cultivation was considered outstanding among Cangya's disciples, otherwise Zhengyangzi wouldn't have taken her on. Although she was far from a prodigy, she had her own unique gift. Her observation skills

and her five senses were unnaturally sharp for her level—especially her hearing.

Only she had heard the dying words of that demonic cultivator.

Before, when Luo-shixiong had been injured saving others, his recovery had been impossibly fast. It was something only she had noticed. Her gut told her it was a significant matter, so she hadn't even told Ruan Xiaolian.

The incident at Xingshan Temple had shaken the cultivation world, but because of the Sword Sage's involvement, no one dared to gossip. But He Yanyun had been shocked that after Luo-shixiong returned and recovered, his cultivation had advanced by leaps and bounds. Though he was clearly at the Small Ascension level, she sometimes sensed the oppressive might of a Great Ascensioner, one that surpassed their master. She could dismiss it as a figment of her imagination once or twice, but after yesterday, there was no denying it.

"Duiyan wrote that she tried a new recipe for glutinous rice chicken," Ruan Xiaolian said. "She said when she lit the fire, she messed up the hand seals and blew up the kitchen."

He Yanyun burst out laughing. "What? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"She was afraid you'd laugh at her, so she only wrote to me."

He Yanyun immediately pulled out a jade slip and began writing. Ruan Xiaolian knew He Yanyun and Qu Duiyan could tease each other even when separated by a million miles. At least He Yanyun had cheered up.

"She blew up the kitchen. Then what?" He Yanyun demanded.

"She got scolded by her mom."

"That's it? I don't believe you. There has to be more!"

"I really can't tell you more than that…"

"Come on, tell me!" He Yanyun jumped up to poke Ruan Xiaolian's stomach. The other girl reached out to block her, but wasn't fast enough.

“Stop, stop, I give! Then her shidi, Chen Yi, happened to pass by and pulled her out of the kitchen wreckage…”

“Ha ha ha! The number one beauty covered in soot, rescued from the stove by her first love. I could laugh about this for a whole year!”

“You forced it out of me!”

“What’re you scared of? She knew if she told you, you’d definitely tell me.”

Ruan Xiaolian thought for a moment. “*That’s* true.”

Later, Qu Duiyan would ask her why He Yanyun took so long to reply.

Having finished composing her message, He Yanyun felt refreshed and spirited. When she looked up and gazed into the distance, she noticed a figure standing on the rooftop across from theirs.

“Luo-shixiong…”

Her voice was soft, nearly lost in the autumn wind, but Luo Mingchuan heard it. He turned and smiled.

“We’ve been through much lately, and we set out again tomorrow,” he said. “Rest early, Shimei.”

“Shixiong, have you been…all right lately?” Her question was a little hesitant. Even she didn’t quite know what she was asking, and it frustrated her.

“I’ve been well,” Luo Mingchuan answered. His gaze was steady, his voice gentle yet empowered by certainty.

In that moment, He Yanyun felt her recent worries had been pointless. Shixiong was still her shixiong. The one she respected, admired, and had regarded as an elder brother for years. That was enough. She believed in him. Were other things important too? Of course. But the great affairs of the world were for great figures to handle. She’d rather fret over her shixiong’s romantic prospects.

Her smile gained a teasing edge. “When is Yin-shixiong coming back?”

Luo Mingchuan froze. He had always been forthright. It'd never occurred to him that one day, the mention of Yin Biyue would stir a strange bashfulness in his heart.

He turned to the distant moon. "I don't know, but it shouldn't be too long…"

Shidi had said he'd be back soon.

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THE SWORD SAGE AND YIN BIYUE trekked across the wasteland. With nothing obstructing the view, the moon appeared exceptionally large. Its cold silver light shone upon Yihu, its blade as clean as water, untainted by blood.

Yin Biyue hadn't sheathed his sword again.

He hadn't killed anyone else, but the fights and ambushes were normal. His opponents would flee at full speed if their first strike didn't kill. Every day, he danced with death.

At night, the Sword Sage slept on the branches of withered trees, while Yin Biyue meditated below. The sky stretched eternally above, the earth endlessly below, and the night wind cried.

His master was from the Eastern Continent. When he left for Cangya in his youth, had he also crossed this wasteland? Had he spent sleepless nights fending off bandits and hunters? Maybe that was why he now placed such importance on sleep quality.

During their journey, the master and disciple also conversed. Wei Jingfeng was blunt, so Yin Biyue also became direct when he had questions, even if he didn't understand some of the answers.

"What kind of sword is Yihu?"

"A divine weapon."

"Why did you give it to me?"

"I didn't. It chose you."

“Shifu, why did you leave the Eastern Continent?”

“When I was little, my village perished… Li Tugen said he wanted to see the outside world.”

“How did you get out?”

“Li Tugen knew how to reckon even back then. We avoided the enemies he foresaw.”

“And those he couldn’t foresee?”

“Those he couldn’t foresee, we killed together.”

“They say you and Headmaster-xiansheng once joined forces to kill a Great Ascensioner when you were only at the Breakthrough level. Is that true?”

The Sword Sage hummed. “Mmm…yeah.” Although it was a legend, the truth was often more terrifying than the tales.

“In the last stage of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net, will the soul really become undying?”

Headmaster-xiansheng had told him this. Yin Biyue found it too outlandish to believe. Then again, couldn’t he, with his own long life transmigrating from one villain role to the next, be considered an undying soul?

“Whether it does or not, defying heaven like that is boring.” Not meaningless—just boring.

“Shifu, don’t you cultivate to pursue immortality?”

Of the millions of cultivators in the world, their goals mainly culminated in achieving formidable power, supreme status, and long life.

“I first started cultivating because I enjoyed it. The art of the sword itself is interesting. Later, it was to live freely. As for immortality? That never crossed my mind… Caring too much about that stuff ruins the fun. Die on the road, bury me by the road. Die in a ditch, bury me in a ditch. If wild dogs eat me, at least I’ll have a flesh coffin…”

Even though they were discussing matters of life and death, the Sword Sage’s voice trailed off. He had fallen asleep.

Yin Biyue leaned against the large tree. Moonlight filtered through the leaves and cast a dappled glow upon his face.

Without death, what meaning was there to life? It was a question he'd never considered. His master's transcendence and freedom were realms of heights that he might never reach. But he remembered his master's words: He was the one and only Yin Biyue in the world. He didn't need to be a second Wei Jingfeng. He had his own path to walk.

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EVEN THE ENDLESS WILDERNESS must come to an end. Yin Biyue and his master arrived at the first human settlement they'd seen since landing on the Eastern Continent.

Under the bleak autumn sky, the gray banners on the city walls looked even more desolate. In these chaotic, divided lands, different flags represented different factions' protection. The city had no buildings over three stories, and they were mostly built of stone rather than wood. The main street was a dirt road, empty even at midday. Doors were locked, windows shuttered, and the few people out moved hurriedly, weapons at their waists.

On the Eastern Continent, apart from the Wuyin Snow Plains and the fabled extravagance of Jin Palace, the palace of gold, cities like this dotted the land. Life in a city here offered little more safety than the perilous wastelands.

The Sword Sage led Yin Biyue into the city's only two-story tavern. The stairs groaned under their weight and dropped dust. He slapped two spirit stones on a table and exchanged words with the tavern boss in a thick local dialect. Yin Biyue could only guess a bit of what was said.

The Eastern Continent didn't use copper coins or silver, and no merchant houses exchanged notes. From black markets to taverns, spirit stones were the only currency.

Soon, a quick-handed waiter served them a jug of wine.

“There’s not much edible here, but the liquor’s good,” Wei Jingfeng said. “Only the waters of Minchuan River can brew shaodaozi[12] this strong. Come, try it.”

Yin Biyue raised the bowl and took a sip. The liquor scorched his throat and cut like a blade through his gut. He spluttered and coughed. The Sword Sage burst out laughing and tossed one back.

The waiter returned with a black cloak. Wei Jingfeng tossed it to Yin Biyue. “Bought this for you.”

The cloak covered him well. After donning it, Yin Biyue felt like a demonic cultivator. He had to admit that traveling the Eastern Continent in white Daoist robes was too conspicuous.

“Black doesn’t show stains.” The Sword Sage clearly hadn’t thought about it so deeply. He just cared that bloodstains wouldn’t be obvious, whether they were Yin Biyue’s or his enemies’.

They rested in the city for a night, then headed south the next day toward the Minchuan River. While Wei Jingfeng hired a boat, the sky suddenly darkened. Dust swirled and light rain began to fall.

Seeing they were two young men, the boatman offered up a warning. “The river’s fierce in this weather.”

The Sword Sage smiled and paid him two extra spirit stones. In a turbulent world, a kind word was rare.

Halfway down the river, massive raindrops pelted them from above. The small boat tossed about on the towering waves like a frail autumn leaf. Inside the cabin, the two sat facing each other. Despite the storm outside, not a drop of water made it inside. The dazzling sword before Wei Jingfeng easily outshone the swaying candle above. It was Yin Biyue’s first time seeing Qiufeng Li unsheathed. He stared unblinking, afraid to miss even a glimmer of its radiance. Atop a peak in the Hengduan Mountains, his master had severely wounded Yu Shi using only a finger. He’d wondered at the time: What in this world was worth the Sage drawing his sword?

Wei Jingfeng began polishing the blade. Yin Biyue didn’t want to interrupt.

“Lao-si, is there anything else you want to ask?” Wei Jingfeng broke the silence without looking up.

For some reason, a sense of foreboding rose in Yin Biyue. He’d had this feeling the whole trip, and now it swelled to its apex. On this journey, his master had met many people, done many things, and taught him so much. It felt like settling the past. It felt like he was bidding the world farewell.

And so Yin Biyue asked, an almost imperceptible quiver in his voice: “Shifu, what have you been doing all these years?”

Chapter 73

WHAT HAD HE BEEN DOING all these years? This question was easy enough to answer.

But Wei Jingfeng's thoughts went beyond just the past century. He recalled the great locust tree by Xihe Village, the Fleeting Life's Joy at Chunxiu Pavilion, the nights of heavy snow in Yunyang City, the clouds and wind atop the Cangya Mountains. The enemies slain by his sword, and the disciples who came under his tutelage.

"A hundred years ago, Li Tugen reckoned that the Yunxing Abyss was rapidly expanding. So I went down for a look," he finally answered.

"What's…down there?" Yin Biyue couldn't help but think of Xingshan Temple, when he and Luo Mingchuan had broken into the Buddhist shrine that trapped Liaoguan. His shixiong had seen the bottom of the Yunxing Abyss in his illusion.

"Demonic beings," Wei Jingfeng replied, though his voice remained mild. "Endlessly proliferating demonic beings."

Yin Biyue's stomach dropped. He had only read about demonic beings in ancient texts. Unlike demonic cultivators, who retained human intellect, lower demonic creatures only knew to devour the flesh of the living. They possessed no pain, no emotion.

"Is there a way to eradicate them?" Yin Biyue asked.

"No. After the Great Dao-Demon War, too many died. The balance between life and death in this realm was broken. The chaos brought the Heavenly Tribulation that veiled the sky with molten fire and fractured the earth with that infinite abyss. The malignant energy accumulated in the depths, breeding these demonic beings." Wei Jingfeng set down his sword. "After a million years, they've become an established existence. When they grow hungry enough, they'll emerge to feed. Even without Mo Changyuan's reincarnation, they were due to appear soon."

"So you were down there to exterminate them?"

“Those things just regrow after being killed. Killing treats the symptoms, not the root cause.”

Yin Biyue’s guess was confirmed—his master had been doing something monumental indeed, even if few knew about it. If the Sword Sage hadn’t repeatedly ventured into the abyss over the past hundred years, the world would’ve descended into chaos a long time ago.

Wei Jingfeng rose and stepped out of the cabin. “They say when the sky falls, someone tall’s got to hold it up.” He stood at the bow, where torrential rain poured and furious waves churned before him. “And in this world, who is taller than I?”

Wei Jingfeng had never considered himself a good man. Countless souls had perished under his blade, and he was known to be unreasonable. He also admitted he lacked a lofty sense of duty, like devoting oneself to the world’s welfare, heedless of life or death. If possible, he would much rather spend his days sleeping, drinking, and watching Jun Yu practice his sword. But when a task was thrust before him, if no one else could handle it, he’d do it. It was natural.

“Li Tugen calculated the location of the Sword Mausoleum left behind from the Great Dao-Demon War. Its dragon vein clashes with the Yunxing Abyss. This old fellow will go down and draw out the sword qi. That will seal half of the abyss.”

“Does the Sword Mausoleum actually exist?”

Yin Biyue had always thought the Sword Mausoleum was merely a legend. Tens of thousands of orthodox cultivators had perished in the great war, their corpses corroded by demonic qi, leaving only their swords behind. Their bodies couldn’t be buried, but their swords could. Over time, many tried their luck searching for these divine weapons. After a million years, no one had ever found them, and many believed the Sword Mausoleum just a myth.

“It exists. There’s an array atop it, left over from the Age of Sages. Even now, it retains 70 percent of its power. Most wouldn’t even be able to locate it, let alone break it.”

“How long will you be gone, Shifu?”

“Hard to say. I’ll return once the task is done.”

Yin Biyue thought himself pathetic. As soon as he heard his master's answer, he felt tears well up. He could only imagine what peril lay in the endeavor for the Sword Sage to admit he didn't know when he'd return.

Wei Jingfeng scoffed. "Sniveling like this, how unbecoming! Learn from your Dashixiong. I'm off to handle business, not to die. And Lao-san is worse than you. He wanted to come with me! What good would that do? He'd only be throwing his life away!"

Yin Biyue took a deep breath. "Shifu, we'll wait for you at Cangya."

A task that would determine the fate of the world rested on the Sword Sage's shoulders alone. He was so tall that not a single person could stand beside him.

It was too cruel, too unfair. But when had the world ever been fair?

The invisible barrier over the boat's cabin vanished. Torrential rain crashed down and a frigid wind froze their bones. Wei Jingfeng stood at the bow, solitary and tall, his sleeves whipping in the wind.

He opened his arms to the tempest, shouting into the storm. "What manner of man am I? My heart can hold the universe!" Then he hung his head, forlorn. "Yet the universe cannot embrace me."

The Sword Sage had lived a free and passionate life, arriving in this world and heralding the dawn of the Age of Stars in a blaze of glory. Thus, when it was his time to leave, he would not quietly fade away. He had destroyed the grand halls of Xingshan Temple and grievously wounded the Second Sage Yu Shi of Baopu Sect. The two deeds had stirred the world. His grudges were settled, but his attachments remained.

He raised his sword and cast his eyes upon it pensively. Chunshan Xiao and Qiufeng Li had been a pair since they'd been forged. But in the autumn wind, gatherings and partings were never his to decide.

"Lao-si, I haven't taught you much," Wei Jingfeng said. His typically carefree voice rose and fell with emotion. "I'm afraid I won't make it back in time for your crowning ceremony."

A cultivator's crowning ceremony was always presided over by one's sect elders. This was a recognition of the disciple's adulthood and a blessing for the cultivation path ahead.

The Sword Sage turned around. There was a blackwood crown in his hand. “You’re not of age yet, but the time has come.”

The time to grow and take on responsibility. To face the storm head-on.

Yin Biyue knelt and prostrated himself against the floor. Wei Jingfeng gathered his white hair and secured it within the crown with slightly clumsy movements. Yin Biyue adjusted the crown, stood up, and performed a disciple’s bow again. The ceremony was complete. No blessings, no applause, no audience. Only a lone boat in a storm, accompanied by towering waves.

The Sword Sage smiled at him, then turned away, sword in hand.

“Shifu!” Yin Biyue called out.

The small boat lurched. With a whirl of his sleeves, Wei Jingfeng strode away on top of the river.

The raging currents crashed against the rocks, yet dared not wet the hem of his robes. The wind cried, as if bidding him farewell.

Speak not of the river’s perilous wind and wave,

For the roads of this world are harder to brave.[13]

***

IN YUNYANG CITY, dark clouds obscured the moon, and the autumn wind cut like a blade. The courtyard stood empty. Headmaster-xiansheng was atop the library’s eaves, gazing over the lamplit expanse of the sprawling academy.

He understood why Wei Jingfeng liked standing here. The view was unparalleled, though it was also bitterly cold. To stand above the world was to stand alone.

He had said to Yin Biyue: “Maybe Wei Jingfeng is right. So let’s give it a try.”

Try to contend with heaven. Try to rewrite fate.

But trying required time. Yin Biyue needed time to grow. Even if his progress was astonishing—in all the centuries past, had there ever been a younger Small Ascensioner?—it still wasn't fast enough. Wei Jingfeng had left to buy him time.

This was something Headmaster-xiansheng had always opposed, where he and the Sword Sage truly diverged. Wei Jingfeng would never change his mind.

"No one has the right to decide another's fate. Not the heavens, not even a Sage," Wei Jingfeng had said when Headmaster-xiansheng wanted to kill Luo Mingchuan. Rather than arguing for his belief in Yin Biyue, Wei Jingfeng trusted his own judgment and remained steadfast to his principles.

Headmaster-xiansheng looked up, hoping to see the bright, icy blue star, but his vision blurred. The whole sky was hazy.

"I've grown old…" he muttered.

***

JUN YU TRAINED AT THE PRECIPICE, still practicing Chongshan Minor. Without vital qi, only the glare of his sword sundered the night. Sixty-three thousand strokes a day. It'd been this way since the day he entered the sect. In the third month, spring mountains shimmered with mirth; in the tenth month, autumn mountains rolled like grazing herds. The seasons took flight, a solitary fowl in the long wind.

Long ago, this place had no name. In those days, it wasn't called Xihua Peak. It was just him and his master. He'd never been good at socializing, and the Sword Sage hadn't been very talkative back then either. They could spend whole days practicing the sword.

The sea of clouds over Tianxin Cliff stretched forever, just like the snowstorm in Yunyang City that night. Huddled in a street corner, he'd been found by a man who looked like a young noble in a fox-fur mantle, holding

an azure umbrella. Thereafter, he was Jun Yu. That was so long ago, yet when he recalled it now, it felt like yesterday.

YAN XING WAS STILL slumped over a table at Chunxiu Pavilion. Shattered wine jugs littered the floor. Chunxiu Pavilion had been closed for the past half a month, with him as the sole patron. Miss Luhua idly flipped through the ledger in silence.

"My song of ambition lies silent, desolate; yet still I must drift, alone evermore."

Yan Xing had heard this once and thought, *What idiot writes such mushy lines? If you don't run now, are you going to get beaten up alongside me?*

He remembered seeing, through a haze of blood, the young noble sitting by the window.

"Yellow leaves still face wind and rain, blue towers keep their songs unchanged."[14]

Of course the Sword Sage hadn't been beaten. Instead, he'd beaten the assailants.

Back then, Luhua hadn't been "Miss Luhua," but a budding young girl timidly hiding behind the counter as she watched the brawl in the front room. Now, beyond the window, the storm raged, while inside stood a single dim candle.

A hoarse voice sang:

"Heroes ask not the return road—

Wind and snow see them off.

Swords in hand, ascend above.

With this wine, I urge of you,

Let the sorrow of parting be washed through."

Without the accompaniment of instruments, the song echoed faintly in Chunxiu Pavilion.

Yan Xing rose, pushed open the door, and walked into the storm. His fortnight of drunkenness finally wore off. Alone, he set off toward the Cangya Mountains.

***

THAT NIGHT, the spiritual energy of the Eastern Continent shifted violently. Many sensed it.

In the sutra library of Jiekong Temple, Wuwang closed his eyes and murmured, “Amitabha Buddha.”

In the bamboo tower amid the Qinglu Mountains, Zhou Yuandao inspected his sword by lamplight.

In the resplendent great halls of the Northern Imperial Palace, Duan Sheng’an hesitated for once as he regarded his son, ultimately saying nothing.

At the bottom of the Hengduan Mountains’ tallest cliff, Yu Shi, covered in blood, gazed eastward and broke out in maniacal laughter.

None of this concerned Yin Biyue.

He rowed against the current, broke waves and parted winds, to come ashore by the river. He passed through the wasteland he’d traversed coming here, heading for Cangya.

The Eastern Continent had never been peaceful. Traveling alone, he encountered innumerable hunters. Whoever came to kill him, he killed. As he killed his way out of the wastelands, he clashed several times with the demonic cultivators of the Twelve Palaces. Living on the edge brought him many new epiphanies.

Soon, the entire Eastern Continent knew of the white-haired, cold-eyed youth with a heart of ice who wielded an orthodox sword—who left no survivors in his wake.

Yin Biyue paid no mind to the increasingly outlandish rumors. He only knew he had to return to Cangya.

Right now, all he wanted was to go home.

Chapter 74

THE NORTHERNMOST PART of the Eastern Continent was a huge ice shield. Permafrost, snow, and the instant-freeze temperatures were enough to kill all weak life, leaving only thick-skinned, bloodthirsty beasts. Against the endless white curtain of snow, a black shadow stood out in stark relief. A figure dashed at incredible speed, scaling the mist-shrouded peaks in moments, passing countless palace towers before arriving at the grandest hall.

Despite possessing the skill to tread the towering snowcapped peaks as if they were flat ground, the newcomer could only straighten his robes and stand respectfully outside the hall. He had to wait for his arrival to be announced through the layers of hierarchy.

Finally, the doors opened. The dazzling, magnificent light spilled out, accompanied by a warm, scented breeze and the languid music of wooden instruments. The newcomer stepped inside. As the doors closed behind him, the blizzard outside was replaced by the warmth of spring.

At the end of the resplendent hall, behind layers of fine silk drapes, the silhouette of a woman reclined against a golden quilted divan. Despite the obstruction of the curtains, anyone who glimpsed this scene would instinctively consider her a peerless beauty.

The figure behind the curtains did not move. The newcomer dared not raise his head, but he could sense her sharp gaze on him, as if she might slice through his skin and bones, inch by inch.

Steadying himself, he knelt and bowed.

“Palace Master, someone has seen His Grace on the western frontier.”

The kneeling man felt cold sweat roll down his neck. It seemed an age before a hand finally extended from behind the gauze curtains. The hand was like an orchid bud waiting to bloom, slender and delicate. In its presence, the incense in the hall seemed more fragrant.

The hand waved elegantly, and the music and dancing fell away. The players retreated without a sound.

The kneeling man presented a translucent pearl. “Our spy planted in the Bi Palace carried this Memory Pearl. The last image transmitted before his death was of our lord.”

The delicate hand beckoned from afar, and the pearl came to rest upon her fingertips. Twirling the pearl in her hand, the lady behind the drapes rose. Her figure was supple, draped in a sheer gauze robe the color of jade. Barefoot, she stood on dazzling polished glass tiles that reflected her graceful form. The reliefs and pearls on golden walls, the palace lanterns and colored banners on painted beams, all paled in comparison to her beauty.

Yu Zhanmei found it dull. Despite her beauty, no one dared look at her.

When the Sword Sage had set foot in the wastelands, she had sensed it. However, a Sage was above her—she couldn’t stop him or ask what he planned to do. Now that the Sage had departed and Yu Shi was gravely wounded, if she were to leave the Eastern Continent, who could stop her? The Northern Emperor was approaching his lifespan’s end, and that Headmaster-xiansheng in the academy had also weakened.

As she gazed at the pearl, the woman’s lips curled upward, her smile like a spring breeze stirring willow branches along the riverbank. “Let us go meet His Grace,” she said, her voice full of spring’s intoxicating blossoms.

“The Palace Master departs—”

“The Palace Master departs—”

The successive announcements echoed outward, reverberating from countless palace halls to the silent snow peak. From bright-yellow glazed tiles to cliffside pines, the snow piled upon them shook loose in flurries.

***

BENEATH THE OVERARCHING NIGHT, a cold moon broke through the clouds. Yin Biyue sat high on a large tree, almost invisible in the dense foliage, wrapped in his black cloak. He was no longer the plump sheep waiting to be slaughtered he'd been when he'd first arrived on the Eastern Continent; no hunter would thoughtlessly provoke him now. Gazing into the distance, he could see the edge of the wastelands. Based on his current progress, he estimated he would leave the barren lands and reach the nearest village tomorrow.

Under the glaring moonlight, he pulled out a book from his robes. It was one gifted to him by Headmaster-xiansheng: *The Enchanting Immortal Lord and the Cold, Lovely Consort*.

Yin Biyue had thought it was a common storybook, until three nights ago when he'd begun reading the first volume and discovered it was in fact a set of journals—ones that had belonged to the True Immortal Yi Lingxiao.

The journals contained no instruction on cultivation methods, no sword art or techniques, only daily life and training, with some trivial anecdotes thrown in. Had it not matched the timelines and major events, with handwriting identical to the fragmented Lingxiao Sword Manual in the academy's library, one could hardly tell these were a chronicle of a True Immortal's life. Yin Biyue had been incredulous at first, but after cross-referencing details with historical texts he'd studied, he found these journals stood up to logical scrutiny. Many puzzling pieces about the Age of Sages and the Great Dao-Demon War now had plausible explanations.

He had never been this close to historical truth, yet the more he read, the more alarmed he grew. Because Yi Lingxiao's narrative tone sounded exactly like a transmigrator's.

Mo Changyuan is an idiot, Liaoguan's unreliable. War starts tomorrow, morale is low. Ugh, troops are so hard to lead…

Who would've guessed Yi Lingxiao would write such words on the eve of the earth-shattering Great Dao-Demon War? Later entries grew increasingly rough, indicating the writer's distress.

I saw Mo Changyuan today. He's changed. Compared to when he was little, I barely recognized him…

He’s past the point of return, so I killed him. I didn’t want this.

I didn’t live this life well. This sucks.

Yin Biyue closed the book, confusion washing over him.

Even though the descriptions were brief, they conjured vivid imagery. Yin Biyue couldn’t help feeling that if he were Yi Lingxiao leaving records behind, he might write like this too. He might even give it a bad joke of a title like *The Enchanting Immortal Lord and the Cold, Lovely Consort*.

But if Yi Lingxiao really was a transmigrator, what did that make this world? By all appearances, he sounded like a protagonist from a power fantasy novel. Yin Biyue slowly shook his head, feeling he could not view this world with normal logic anymore.

Initially, Yin Biyue had thought Luo Mingchuan was the protagonist. However, as soon as his shixiong jumped into the abyss, the “predecessor imparting cultivation” scenario turned out to be a scam, and his Ghara Pupil Technique revealed itself to be the hallmark skill of a Final Boss.

Then, when Yin Biyue met his top-rated master, he’d thought such a carefree winner-in-life should be the protagonist. But Wei Jingfeng had left for the Sword Mausoleum alone, his return unknown.

Yin Biyue tucked the book away in his robes and looked through the foliage to the moon hanging in the heavens above. He was reminded of his shixiong on the Western Continent. As the saying went, “Though miles apart, we share the same moon.”[15] This thought brought peace to Yin Biyue’s heart.

Coming to this world and cultivating had felt more real, given him a stronger sense of belonging, than any of his previous lives. Whether or not this world followed a script no longer mattered. Though he still carried a Fiend Halo, he no longer desired to play a villain. He just wanted to work hard practicing his sword, grow stronger, and live a good, peaceful life. He wanted to prove himself worthy of his master’s faith in him.

He just wanted to alter the trajectory of the stars and rewrite destiny. Yin Biyue smiled at the thought.

Abruptly, he turned, holding his breath. Living through constant fights on this trip had honed not only his combat instincts but also his

senses and judgment.

A grand procession crossed the wastelands, in its center a palanquin as tall as a palace tower. Four Great Ascensioners bore the litter and moved with such swiftness the ground seemed to shrink beneath them. Despite their speed, the grand palanquin was as steady as stone. Coming from the north, they carried the deadly coldness of the ice shield. A hundred miles of the wastelands lay deathly still in their wake.

Yin Biyue guessed their identities, and was aware he couldn't defeat even one palanquin bearer, let alone the indistinct figure behind the curtains.

He gazed north, and caught sight of that mist-shrouded snowy peak, solitary and insurmountable. Upon it stood Jin Palace, the mightiest of the twelve. It had inherited the foundations of the demonic dominion before its split.

The Tongtian Snow Peaks should've been as cold as a tomb. In truth, no one was ignorant of the perpetual decadence and splendor inside Jin Palace. Though "The Palace of Gold fulfills every mortal's fantasy of the immortal realm" was just a saying, it had stirred boundless imaginings.

While the Northern Continent's royalty dined extravagantly, even commoners living in the imperial capital lived in wealth and comfort. From the palace halls to ordinary streets, prosperity reigned. The homes of the rich and noble were indeed full of excessive wine and meat, but the frozen corpses of those who'd died from starvation were also a rare sight.

The Eastern Continent presented another extreme: Immortal paradise upon snow peaks, hellish purgatory across the wastelands. Between extreme deprivation and extreme extravagance, some turned to banditry to survive day-to-day, while others reveled in drink and songs. Because the palace master upon the throne enjoyed indulgence, even the frozen world of ice and snow hosted decadence. Yin Biyue never expected to encounter her so soon. Even separated by over a hundred miles of wilderness, the velvet-black night, and the drapes in the palanquin, he still glimpsed her silhouette —one of unparalleled beauty and danger.

He knew nothing, not even a blade of grass, escaped the notice of those at such powerful cultivation levels. It made no difference whether he acted or not. He held his breath and watched the procession disappear

beyond the edges of the wastelands, grateful they were in a hurry to be elsewhere.

His hand gripped his sword hilt.

He'd thought his progress was fast, but no matter how rapid his advancement, before a handful of the world's supreme elites, he remained insignificant as an ant. Still not strong enough.

Yihu hummed in the night wind, echoing either its resentment or its master's heart.

***

AFTER DAYS OF PATROLLING the Northern Continent's borders, the Cangya disciples encountered no more traces of demonic cultivators, so they changed course to Xian Harbor by the Floating Sea. Demonic cultivators had to cross these waters if they were to come from the Eastern Continent. Having received news from Cangya, many merchant ships running the Eastern Continent route had suspended their voyages. Border inspections, nonoperational for years, resumed. Every vessel underwent examination by demonic-qi-screening arrays upon docking.

Luo Mingchuan, concerned that the arrays were in a state of disrepair after so many years, stayed at the harbor front to reinforce them.

The usual harbor bustle had dwindled since the demonic cultivators' incursion into the Western Continent. Several great ships and the distant lighthouse stood silent in the sea winds. Where the water met the sky, white seabirds circled low.

Suddenly, a black speck disrupted the blue-white tranquility, parting the waves at an impossible speed. Within moments it approached within a few hundred feet of the shore, close enough to discern a figure standing at its bow. The disciples on shore were greatly alarmed. A powerful fighter must be at the helm for such a small vessel to cross the vast ocean with such speed.

"Oh no, a ship from the east! Alert Luo-shixiong at once!"

“Who goes there?!”

The boat was still some distance from the harbor when the figure at the bow leaped up, then treaded the air over the waves so swiftly they were a blur.

The newcomer was wrapped in a black cloak that showed only a pale, thin chin beneath the hood. Though devoid of demonic qi, the bloodlust radiating from the figure was crushing. Several Cangya disciples reached for their swords only to find their fingers frozen under such might.

The next moment, white sleeves fluttered between sea and sky. The disciples relaxed in relief.

“Luo-shixiong is here!”

The newcomer had already alighted upon the shore and stopped in front of Luo Mingchuan. Suddenly, the waves calmed, and the invisible air of hostility dissipated. Luo Mingchuan smiled softly.

The cloak hood fell back. In the blowing sea wind, their black and white locks intertwined.

Chapter 75

YIN BIYUE HAD BEEN TENSE as a taut string throughout his journey, bracing for an ambush every waking moment. He'd found no rest during his travels. It wasn't that he wanted to exude such a threatening aura, but after constant battles, he'd grown accustomed to it and forgotten to rein it in. It was only when he saw Luo Mingchuan that he remembered to relax.

What he didn't realize was that, while he felt small and weak, the others already saw him as unbelievably strong.

The Cangya disciples gathered around him, their exclamations rising along the shore.

"It's actually Yin-shixiong!"

"Yin-shixiong has attained Small Ascension!"

"That's too fast! I should just give up now…"

As socially awkward as ever, Yin Biyue only nodded to each in acknowledgment. His explanation was as succinct as his greetings: "I went to the Eastern Continent to slay demonic cultivators. Leveled up."

This somewhat aloof response only reinforced the disciples' view of him as cold-faced but warmhearted.

Luo Mingchuan quietly took two steps forward, subtly positioning himself between Yin Biyue and the others.

Noticing this, He Yanyun grinned. "Yin-shixiong, you must be tired from your journey. We'll let you rest. The inspection of Xian Harbor's defenses isn't finished yet. Xiaolian, come with me." She addressed Ruan Xiaolian, but everyone took the hint.

"Wait, we'll go too…"

"Luo-shixiong, accompany Yin-shixiong."

The crowd dispersed like startled birds, leaving only the sound of blowing wind and crashing waves.

Luo Mingchuan turned a little. A faint smile graced his lips. “Congratulations on your breakthrough, Shidi.”

He appeared calm and collected on the surface, no different than usual, and maintained his customary mild tone. But his hands inside his sleeves were clenched tight, and all of his focus was devoted to suppressing the surging emotions in his chest. He worried that any lapse would have him pull Yin Biyue into his arms into an embrace so fierce they’d become one, never to part again.

Since Yin Biyue had traversed the Eastern Continent, his demeanor had gained a sharp and murderous edge to complement his usual reserve. His features seemed more defined, somehow. But right now, only Luo Mingchuan was around. Just one sentence from that familiar voice melted away his days of heightened wariness. Endless exhaustion and grief crashed over him almost immediately. He might drown in it.

“Shifu went to the Sword Mausoleum.” Yin Biyue’s voice grew nasal. “I don’t know when he’ll be back…”

His words were abrupt, but Luo Mingchuan understood. His brimming emotions transformed into a tender ache for Yin Biyue.

“He’ll be fine,” Luo Mingchuan said with conviction. “We must have faith in the Sword Sage.”

From anyone else, the reassurance would have meant nothing to Yin Biyue. But from Luo Mingchuan, it held a miraculous calming power. They were already standing close, but Yin Biyue was suddenly struck by the urge to hug his shixiong.

The thought came to him, and he followed his whim without pondering its deeper significance. Luo Mingchuan was very warm. Just as warm as when they were in Ye City, at Xingshan Temple, on the Cangya Mountains. Comfortingly so.

Caught off guard, Luo Mingchuan jolted at the sudden hug and stiffened as a cool presence filled his arms. A strand of white hair brushed his cheek, and their mingled breaths prickled.

After a moment, his clenched fists relaxed and came to rest as light as a dragonfly on the other’s back. The pat was gentle, restrained.

Yin Biyue knew he was overly reliant on his shixiong. He'd reflected on this issue during the days Luo Mingchuan had been unconscious. His reliance had surpassed the trust of their early days. It might become burdensome for Luo Mingchuan. Moreover, Yin Biyue had been crowned. He was an adult and should stand on his own. How could he still seek solace in Luo Mingchuan's arms like a child?

How pathetic.

Yin Biyue's cheeks burned with embarrassment at the thought, and he moved to withdraw. Somehow, Luo Mingchuan's loose hold was unexpectedly firm, and he couldn't pull free.

Fine, I'll just lean on him for a little longer then.

Just a little longer.

***

AFTER REINFORCING Xian Harbor's arrays, they headed for Cangya. The return journey went smoothly. Maybe it was the companionship, but Yin Biyue found the landscapes uplifting to look at.

Along the way, they coordinated defenses with local clans and left communication talismans. Countless menial tasks were handled with methodical efficiency in Luo Mingchuan's hands. Within Cangya's protective sphere, refugees were mostly absorbed by larger towns like Lüeyang, and the situation stabilized.

As for Baopu Sect beyond the Mighty Mountains, there was still no news.

Winter arrived unusually early. Frost covered the grass soon after the leaves fell. Right when the northerly winds began to sweep the earth, their group arrived back at the Cangya Mountains. Many disciples took it upon themselves to gather at the mountain gates, waving their swords in welcome from afar.

For a moment, Yin Biyue was transported back to their departure for the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Now, *this* felt like coming home.

What was more surprising was that their old acquaintances from the tournament awaited them at Qinghe Hall.

When Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan were summoned, Sect Leader Zhengyangzi, Jun Yu, Liu Qishuang, and Yan Xing were already in discussion. The two approached to bow, then noticed the conspicuous purple long robes of Lianjian Sect among the sea of white cloud-patterned robes.

Chen Yi rose and cupped his hands in a salute. “Luo-daoyou, Yin-daoyou, long time no see.”

Luo Mingchuan led Yin Biyue in returning the courtesy, then smiled and said, “Chen-daoyou. Your journey must have been arduous.”

Chen Yi’s plain features and mild temperament were the same as always, but Yin Biyue sensed his aura had become more concentrated—stronger than during their tournament match.

“Luo-shixiong! Yin-shixiong!”

Yin Biyue looked to the voice and found Cheng Tianyu was also there in his ink-splashed robes. Perhaps because his cultivation was the lowest among everyone in the hall, his sense of presence was weaker. It definitely had nothing to do with his height. He greeted them both with a proper bow, appearing more mature than before.

Zhengyangzi cleared his throat, and everyone took their seats.

Chen Yi turned to them with a serious expression. “You’ve only just returned. We wouldn’t normally intrude, but the matter is urgent, hence this visit.”

“Zhong-shixiong and Song-shixiong are guarding the Qinglu Mountains,” Cheng Tianyu added, “so the sect sent me for the talk.”

“What happened?” Luo Mingchuan asked with a frown.

The group of them had bonded through an exchange of blows and developed an appreciation for one another. They saw no need for unnecessary formalities.

Yin Biyue noticed the odd mood in the hall. While his elder shixiong and second shijie were naturally people of few words, even his third shixiong was quiet today.

“One of the palace masters of the Twelve Demonic Palaces has emerged from the Eastern Continent,” Zhengyangzi said.

Yin Biyue’s stomach dropped. “The one from Jin Palace?”

He’d glimpsed that grand palanquin in the wastelands from afar. He’d thought they would only move within the Eastern Continent. Since the Great Dao-Demon War, though skirmishes never stopped between orthodox cultivators and demonic cultivators, no high-ranking demonic cultivators had crossed into other continents. It was an unspoken rule. Like great beasts, they rested and respected one another’s territories.

“Most likely,” Chen Yi said. “Reports say that only the Jin Palace Master travels in a pavilion-sized grand palanquin with gauze drapes.”

Cheng Tianyu had more precise information. “They passed through Lianjian Sect’s affiliated cities in the Central Continent, then crossed the sea. They’re on the Southern Continent now, almost at the foothills of Qinglu. They haven’t killed or clashed with anyone so far. Their purpose remains unclear.”

Yin Biyue frowned. No attacks sounded good on the surface, but he feared a hidden agenda. One of the demonic palace masters leaving the Eastern Continent at a time like this—when the Sword Sage had just entered the Sword Mausoleum—no doubt signaled imminent danger or war.

Zhengyangzi considered further. Lianjian Sect had Qu Jiang, and Qinglu Sword Sect had Zhou Yuandao. Both were among the very few Second Sages in the world. Nevertheless, rash actions could trigger an all-out war—a second cataclysmic Dao-Demon War. Hence Chen Yi’s and Cheng Tianyu’s arrival. They had been tasked with the mission to share intelligence and discuss a potential alliance.

In terms of a cultivator’s long lifespan, they were still young. But their elders believed them capable of taking on great responsibilities.

Zhengyangzi looked at his own disciples again—they were just as young. Headmaster-xiansheng had been right to call this era the Age of Stars. The future of the cultivation world rested on the shoulders of these young people.

When his master was silent, Luo Mingchuan understood the decision was his.

“The current Jin Palace Master seized power by killing her master a hundred years ago. Her foundation is still unstable. Recklessly launching attacks would be unwise. She must have other motives.”

“Exactly,” Chen Yi agreed. “There’s a shorter sea route to the Southern Continent. Why detour through the Central Continent?”

Cheng Tianyu frowned. “If she has designs for both the Central and Southern Continents, why have there been no incidents along the way?”

“Maybe…it’s not that complicated,” Liu Qishuang suddenly interjected. All eyes turned to her.

“That’s right.” Yin Biyue was surprised he hadn’t remembered sooner. “If anyone outside the Demonic Palaces has seen what the Jin Palace Master looks like, it’s Ershijie.”

His comment reminded everyone of Liu Qishuang’s participation in the Battle of Xiling Mountain, and the palace master’s name: Yu Zhanmei.

Proud snow that mocks the frost—Cangya’s willow and *Hibiscus that beams with joy—Jin Palace’s jade* had been a couplet formed from the two women’s names a hundred years before. It was known across the realm. Liu Qishuang and Yu Zhanmei had been evenly matched in their duel at Xiling Mountain, making both famous overnight. Afterward, one returned to secluded cultivation in the Cangya Mountains and had not entered the secular world since. The other had shattered her own bones and meridians, enduring twenty years of suffering in the abyss of the icefield to at last emerge with perfected demonic arts.

When Yu Zhanmei had successfully killed her master and become the new palace master, her title eclipsed her name, and few mentioned the couplet again.

“She probably meant to come west to Cangya,” Liu Qishuang told them. “Except…she can’t tell west from south.”

Cheng Tianyu’s eyes widened in disbelief. “What?!”

Liu Qishuang herself found it hard to believe, but facts were facts. “Besides not being able to tell directions, she doesn’t know her way around in general. She probably just got way off course.”

Now even Chen Yi thought it absurd. “She has so many subordinates. Can none of them navigate?”

“That’s not the issue,” Liu Qishuang said. “She appears gentle as water but kills without blinking.”

“If she insists east is west, who’d dare correct her?” Yan Xing chimed in. “Calling a deer a horse, mistaking south for west… It’s not hard to imagine.”

Liu Qishuang nodded gravely.

Yin Biyue scanned the room. Aside from elder shixiong, who remained composed as always, everyone seemed to be on the verge of freaking out.

Especially Chen Yi and Cheng Tianyu, who’d traveled tirelessly all this way just for this absurdity.

They really pulled the short straws this time. =_=lll

Chapter 76

QINGHE HALL HAD FALLEN into a deep silence, broken only by the repetitive dripping of the water clock. If Liu Qishuang's deduction was correct, the threat Yu Zhanmei posed would shift from Lianjian Sect and Qinglu Sword Sect to the Cangya Mountains. Yan Xing was the first to say something.

"The Twelve Palaces each believe themselves the rightful heirs of the demonic dominion. They refuse to submit to each other. Isn't she worried someone will raze her lair on the Tongtian Snow Peaks while she's gone?"

"You mean this is either an elaborate scheme with foolproof contingency plans, or there's something at Cangya worth her taking such risks," Luo Mingchuan concluded.

Yin Biyue agreed. It couldn't possibly be that with the Sword Sage gone, they thought Cangya, a major sect without a Second Sage, was the easiest target. Anyone that foolish could never maintain control over the massive Jin Palace.

Yan Xing turned to Liu Qishuang. "Shijie, if she's coming to fight you, what are your chances?"

He immediately regretted the blunt question. Pointing out that a former rival might now surpass her was hardly pleasant, no matter how one looked at it.

However, Liu Qishuang answered frankly, "Zero."

No one was surprised. In terms of combat ability alone, apart from Jun Yu, even Sect Leader Zhengyangzi wouldn't claim confidence against Yu Zhanmei now.

The rapid advancement of the Eastern Continent's younger demonic cultivators seemed unbelievable. Most demonic cultivators sought pure power; they didn't pursue mental cultivation or comprehension of the Great Dao. They paid unimaginable costs in exchange for explosive growth. Despite severely shortening their lifespans and how perilous their

breakthroughs were, the risks matched the rewards. This kept demonic cultivation viable.

“You two must be tired after your journey. Please rest. We’ll reconvene tomorrow,” Jun Yu said to Chen Yi and Cheng Tianyu. Attendants came forward to guide them to guest rooms, and the two took their leave. Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue rose to see them to the hall’s entrance.

Yin Biyue thought his elder shixiong hadn’t changed since their first meeting at Qinghe Hall. No one noticed him when he was silent, but when he spoke, he commanded absolute attention. He understood his elder shixiong’s intent. With turbulent times upon them, a multi-sect alliance was necessary. But right now, the primary threat was pointed at the Cangya Mountains. They needed to speak privately.

Yan Xing leaned forward. “It doesn’t matter why Yu Zhanmei is coming. We can take whatever she throws our way. As if we’re afraid!”

Li Qishuang shook her head. “Waiting to see how things develop may be safe, but it’ll put us on the defensive.”

“What do you suggest, Shijie?” Yin Biyue asked.

“I’ll go to her.”

“No,” Jun Yu said.

Liu Qishuang smiled. “I might not be able to beat her, but she can’t hurt me if I go all out. A probe will be enough.”

“I’ll go with Shijie!” Yan Xing exclaimed.

Liu Qishuang scowled at that. “*You* have caused enough trouble. With outsiders present earlier, I held my tongue. Look at the nonsense you’ve done while down from the mountain. Ruining people’s reputation aside, as a shixiong, instead of setting an example and guiding your shidi, you made one clean up your mess. Had I not escorted Wushidi home, I might have never known.”

Yan Xing knew what she was referring to and hung his head. “Shifu has already reprimanded me. I’ve learned my lesson.” But he really couldn’t figure out where the latter part of the lecture came from and couldn’t help but draw his brows together.

Seeing his confusion, Yin Biyue suppressed a laugh and silently explained via sound transmission how their fifth shidi had used a Dragoncloud Pill to save Zhong Shan during the Flower-Plucking Tournament, and how Junior Sect Leader Song had let bygones be bygones in thanks.

Yan Xing was amazed. “No wonder that Cheng kid didn’t draw his sword on me! So it was thanks to Wushidi. Good going, Lao-wu!”

Jun Yu shot Yan Xing a flat look. He clammed up immediately.

“Be extremely careful,” Jun Yu said, turning to Liu Qishuang. He knew her temperament. Once she decided on something, nothing could stop her.

“Understood,” Liu Qishuang answered. “I will depart as soon as they cross the western border.”

Zhengyangzi nodded. “It’s been a long day. Everyone should rest.”

Thus, matters were settled—for now.

Luo Mingchuan left with his master, while Yan Xing slung an arm around Yin Biyue’s shoulders and walked with Jun Yu and Liu Qishuang back toward Xihua Peak. All the while, he eagerly asked about all Yin Biyue had seen in the Eastern Continent.

Yin Biyue answered Yan Xing’s questions as best he could, but his mind was in disarray, filled with the request Luo Mingchuan had just transmitted.

‹Meet on Tianxin Cliff at the hour of Hai.›[16]

His voice was low and warm, like a seed that took root, sprouted, and grew into a towering tree in moments. This feeling was foreign to Yin Biyue, new and curious. He forced himself to remain calm. With great enemies looming, Luo Mingchuan must have important business to discuss.

Why was Yin Biyue so nervous?

***

IN EARLY WINTER, a chill seized Xihua Peak. Gone were autumn's golden and carmine leaves. Only a few dark pines still clung to their greenery through the cracks on the jagged cliffs. As the four passed their master's courtyard, they slowed their pace.

Yin Biyue recalled the day Wei Jingfeng had returned, and the exchange he'd had with Jun Yu in front of this door.

"It's been a few days since I've been back… You've grown taller. Taller than me now."

"Not 'a few days.' It's been one hundred and three years, seven months, and fifteen days."

Wei Jingfeng had definitely spoken to Liu Qishuang and Yan Xing about the Sword Mausoleum, which meant Jun Yu must have been the first to know. Yin Biyue had thought Jun Yu would take it the hardest, yet he had remained composed and betrayed no emotion, as if nothing had happened. Such suppression couldn't be healthy. Not only Yin Biyue thought so; Liu Qishuang and Yan Xing felt the same way.

"Dashixiong…" Yin Biyue began. But he trailed off, not knowing what to say.

Jun Yu understood what he meant and understood the concern in his peers' eyes. But explanations weren't his forte, nor comforting others.

"He'll return eventually," he said. "Just another few hundred years." *Shifu has never lied to me before.*

His conviction was so strong that the other Xihua Peak disciples believed he was right.

***

AT THE HOUR OF HAI, the night was endless, and the moon obscured. Yin Biyue stepped out of the courtyard. Xihua Peak was exceptionally tranquil at night, with the faint cries of partridges floating on the wind. The mountain path was rugged. He walked briskly, eyes down,

the hems of his robes rippling. For some reason, tales of young masters and young mistresses' secret meetings on flower-perfumed spring nights from the stories came to mind. The thoughts flashed through his head and startled him.

He lifted his eyes and spotted a figure standing in the distance at the edge of Tianxin Cliff, tall and upright like a pine, his sleeves billowing in the night wind.

Right. It was winter. What "hidden fragrances stirring the spring night"? The one waiting for him was his shixiong, not some delicately painted maiden pining for her match. He was delusional. Utterly delusional.

Yin Biyue steadied himself and, before he realized it, reached Luo Mingchuan's side. He went to speak, but Luo Mingchuan turned around first.

"Shidi," he murmured with a quiet laugh.

"Sorry I'm late, Shixiong."

"Not at all. I arrived early."

Yin Biyue glanced around. The northerly wind blew as dark clouds churned in the distance.

"Shixiong, did you have something to tell me?"

Luo Mingchuan nodded.

He had some guesses about Yu Zhanmei's intentions. Originally, he hadn't wanted to worry Yin Biyue, but their experience in Xingshan Temple's shrine changed his mind. Shidi had said that trust meant speaking openly to avoid misunderstandings in the future.

So he spoke. "Jin Palace's lineage originates from the demonic dominion's right-hand guardian. Their demonic arts share the same origin as the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net. When I fought a group of demonic cultivators on the Western Continent's border and used the Ghara Pupil Technique, one of them addressed me as 'My Lord.' I think they must've noticed something…"

Yin Biyue's stomach dropped. "You suspect that Jin Palace left the Snow Plains to find you?"

“Yes. I sealed Liaoguan’s cultivation within my body, but fragments of his memories remain, including the complete set of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net.”

Yin Biyue knew the significance of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net in the demonic arts. What demonic cultivator wouldn’t want to practice it? If Yu Zhanmei had come for that knowledge, the risk was worth it. Then something else came to mind, something far more important—something Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan had agreed upon before Yin Biyue left Cangya with the Sword Sage.

“Shixiong, you promised to wait for my return so we could practice the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net together.”

Luo Mingchuan tensed. “I made no such promise. I said we’d discuss it after your crowning ceremony.”

“I’ve been crowned. Shifu did it himself.”

“This…” Luo Mingchuan looked at the dark crown tied on the white hair and found himself at a loss for words.

“Shifu also said that even though I’m not of age yet, the time has come.”

Luo Mingchuan averted his eyes. “Right now, a storm is brewing. There are troubled times ahea—”

Yin Biyue cut him off. “That’s precisely *why* you can’t destroy your cultivation and start over! With chaos on the horizon, we both need greater strength…”

“That is how it is, true,” Luo Mingchuan replied vaguely.

Yin Biyue brightened. “So you agree, Shixiong?”

Luo Mingchuan sighed. He had to explain properly at this point, but how to broach the subject when Yin Biyue was so pure?

“I’ve been thoughtless,” Luo Mingchuan said. “The winds are harsh at the cliff’s edge in the winter. I should’ve been the one to come to you instead… Let me escort you back first. We’ll talk more inside.”

This response somehow reminded Yin Biyue of his previous thought about secret meetings. All his unapologetic boldness and assertiveness

crumbled into guilty hesitation, and he lowered his gaze to avoid his shixiong's eyes. He might have been beyond help, because his mind was wandering again.

Ah, Shixiong coming to find me in the middle of the night, climbing over the wall and imitating a cat's meow, while I sneakily push open the window…

OMG! What the hell kind of nonsense am I imagining?!

Luo Mingchuan's warm presence drew near. Before Yin Biyue could react, Luo Mingchuan's hand grasped his wrist. The world spun, and when he opened his eyes again, he was standing at the gate to his own courtyard. Luo Mingchuan must have been carrying the Cangya Token, which allowed him to travel anywhere within Cangya's bounds. Coming back to his senses, Yin Biyue yanked Luo Mingchuan into the courtyard and pushed him through the door of his house.

We're gonna settle this today! Don't think we're done just because you sent me home!

***

INSIDE REBIRTH COMPANY, the intern salesperson Liu Xiaodai stood in front of the large floor-to-ceiling window of the tech department with his head bowed, enduring a bout of scolding from the department head, Zhang Qingqing.

"What's the status of Mister Villain who took the wrong halo?"

"I've already implemented emergency measures…"

"What measures? Let's hear it."

"I tracked down the halo's production batch number, modified the source code, and put the halo on cooldown!"

Zhang Qingqing rubbed the bridge of her nose, deeply convinced that this batch of interns had bought their credentials from diploma mills. "You

think that’s clever, do you? The halo is our only link to that client! How are we supposed to find him if the halo’s on cooldown?”

Liu Xiaodai was stumped. “Uh…”

Zhang Qingqing forced herself to calm down. “The flow of time is different between dimensions. It might not seem like much time has passed here, but Mister Villain’s *kids* could be running around as background extras as we speak! This is a Level 1 operational incident, Xiaodai.”

Liu Xiaodai panicked. “Wh-what do we do?”

“First, reactivate the halo. Locate Mister Villain, then find someone powerful enough to traverse the billionfold worlds at will—someone who can temporarily bypass the universe’s laws and sanctions—to remove the halo completely. After that, explain the situation to the client and negotiate compensation.”

“I can reactivate the halo, but to find someone who can reach Mister Villain…” Liu Xiaodai was on the verge of tears.

Zhang Qingqing turned her head away, unable to bear his pleading gaze. “I don’t have the ability… Go beg Mister Cheng.”

Now Liu Xiaodai really was going to cry.

“Don’t be scared. Of all the experts in the company, Mister Cheng is the kindest. He just seems unapproachable. That’s all.”

Chapter 77

LUO MINGCHUAN was caught off guard when Yin Biyue shoved him into the house.

“Shidi…”

“Shixiong, let’s settle this today. Why won’t you let me practice the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net? Is there some issue with the art, or do you simply not trust me?!”

Luo Mingchuan’s sigh echoed in the darkness. “Don’t say something like that. How could I not trust you?”

They had entered in such a flurry that it took Yin Biyue a moment to notice the lamps weren’t lit. Though both he and Luo Mingchuan could see fine in the dark given their cultivation levels, the dark room and their close proximity made him feel awkward.

The awkwardness only lasted for a moment. His right hand still clutching Luo Mingchuan’s sleeve, he flicked his other hand, stirring his vital qi. A candle flared with light, casting overlapping shadows against the paper window.

“As long as you trust me, I can’t think of any other issue.”

Hearing this, Luo Mingchuan watched the candlelight dance across his shidi’s white hair and brow, gilding them in a warm glow. His bright eyes shimmered like starlight. Something tickled Luo Mingchuan’s heart. It was a tingling feeling.

“Shidi, even though you’ve been crowned, you’re still too young,” Luo Mingchuan said. “Wait, don’t argue yet. When I say ‘young,’ I don’t mean in age. Sometimes I wonder if you can really tell the difference between dependency and love? Do you know what you truly want? Are you prepared to spend the rest of your long life with someone? After we join in union, if you grew tired of me, decided this isn’t what you want, and left me, I honestly don’t know what I’d do… Letting you go would be impossible.

“Shidi, have you really thought this through?”

The topic had changed too fast. Yin Biyue’s mind went blank.

Luo Mingchuan had been right. At the first sentence, Yin Biyue had wanted to retort *I’m not young!* But by the time Luo Mingchuan mentioned dependence and love, it was like a thunderclap had blasted his brain out of his skull, leaving him unable to think.

Luo Mingchuan continued softly, as if afraid of shattering something fragile. “The final stage of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net requires dual cultivation. Do you understand what dual cultivation is? It’s something only cultivation partners joined in union can do…”

Boom! Another thunderclap.

Do you understand what dual cultivation is?!

Do you understand?!

Do you?!

?!

Heavens almighty, Yin Biyue felt like those two words—*dual cultivation*—were all that was left in his brain.

That was… Wasn’t that the hanky-panky business between male and female protagonists? Were…were they not following the orthodox path of cultivation? Was the one who came up with this method—Liaoguan—some sort of a colossal idiot?! Did that mean that all those times he’d brought it up, pestering Luo Mingchuan to agree, he’d actually been asking for dual cultivation?

H-how shameless.

I want to die. (□_□)

‹Ding! User embarrassment level exceeded 100. Predicament identified. Do you wish to activate Halo Helper?›

Holy shit!!!

When the familiar voice rang in his head, Yin Biyue almost burst into tears.

Look at this bargain bin knockoff halo! It never shows up in life-or-death moments but activates based on embarrassment levels?!

Whatever! Perfect timing, what a lifesaver! Yes, yes, yes! Activate it!

Seeing Yin Biyue frozen, his gaze dodging away, Luo Mingchuan knew his shidi hadn't fully considered the idea. He sighed inwardly, slightly bitter, but also frustrated at his own impatience. Speaking so bluntly must have frightened him.

Gently, he pulled his sleeve free from Yin Biyue's grip and took a couple of steps back. He smiled mildly. "It's getting late. You should rest, Shidi. I'll…"

His unfinished words died in his throat when a cool presence pressed against him. Yin Biyue had wrapped his arms around Luo Mingchuan's waist. This was an embrace unlike any of their previous ones; it was no longer one of a child clinging to his sibling with affection.

"How could I not understand? Do you not want to do it with me, Shixiong? Dual cultivation as partners?"

Yin Biyue looked up from within the circle of Luo Mingchuan's arms with a smile like the first melt of snow on red plum blossoms, cool yet inviting.

"I'm not young anymore. Of course I know what I want…"

The figure in his arms tilted away slightly, the corners of his eyes carrying a hint of seduction, as he blew his hot breath against Luo Mingchuan's neck.

He felt as if a fire had ignited within him, burning from his neck down the robes covering their flushed bodies, to the hands around his waist, and all the way into his heart.

Luo Mingchuan lowered his head, thinking, *I've lost my mind*. He couldn't stop himself from pulling Yin Biyue closer.

But Yin Biyue wasn't done yet. His smile deepened, intoxicating as strong liquor. He took Luo Mingchuan's hand to press it against his own chest.

"I want you, Shixiong."

In that instant, every spark of passion inside Luo Mingchuan exploded at once.

‹Ding! The target's embarrassment level has exceeded the user's. Predicament over. Assistance ended. Halo Helper, your good friend. Making your problems come to an end!›

Yin Biyue snapped back to reality.

Right now, he was holding Luo Mingchuan's wrist less than half an inch from his own chest. If he'd wanted to crawl into a hole before activating the halo, now he wanted to slit his own throat with Yihu and die on the spot.

Luo Mingchuan stared at him, eyes turbulent with emotions. Yin Biyue had never seen such a look in his eyes before, as if feelings long suppressed were about to erupt.

"Shixiong, I'm not, I, um…" Yin Biyue floundered for an explanation until an idea struck him. "Ah, right! I wanted to show you a book!"

He released Luo Mingchuan's hand and hurriedly pulled a book from where it was stashed in his robes. "This! Shixiong, you simply *have* to take a look at it."

Genuine authentic journal of the True Immortal, very rare! Quick, look at the book, not at me! Augh, screw the halo. I can only depend on myself!

When Luo Mingchuan glanced down, his expression turned inscrutable. “Shidi, where did you get something like this?”

“Headmaster-xiansheng gave it to me!”

Luo Mingchuan paused. Hit by a sudden realization, he cleared his throat and averted his eyes. “Perhaps you should visit the academy less. What kind of nonsense has Xiansheng been teaching you…?”

Yin Biyue was about to argue when Luo Mingchuan muttered, “Rest early.” With that, he fled from the room.

Yin Biyue glanced down at the book in his hand and remembered the problem: *The Enchanting Immortal Lord and the Cold, Lovely Consort*.

Dammit, I forgot about the title!

Yin Biyue was so mortified and speechless that he couldn’t sleep all night, much less meditate.

***

THE NEXT DAY, during the assembly in the main hall, Yin Biyue was still distracted. It wasn’t until Yan Xing called his name twice after he’d taken his seat that he snapped out of it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Luo Mingchuan acting as proper as ever, paying him no extra attention, as if he’d forgotten last night’s absurdity. This made him feel a little better.

In truth, Luo Mingchuan had tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep well either. He’d tried reciting the Purification Mantra to meditate but ended up dreaming instead. This morning, he’d woken up feeling guilty and unsure how to face Yin Biyue. He blamed Headmaster-xiansheng for corrupting Yin Biyue, but also felt it was his own fault. He’d been negligent when he’d failed to notice his shidi learning such things.

Both were pulled from their internal dilemmas quickly enough when Sect Leader Zhengyangzi informed the room that Chen Yi had received an urgent missive from his sect late last night. He'd already rushed back to Lianjian Sect.

Cheng Tianyu was surprised by the news. "So urgent…?"

Everyone was contemplative. Lianjian Sect had the Second Sage Qu Jiang overseeing it. What major event or upheaval could warrant such a hurried recall of a disciple who was away? However, it was another sect's internal affair, so courtesy didn't allow them to pry further.

"Before I left, Baopu Sect sent an invitation," Cheng Tianyu said, bringing up another matter. "They've developed a new sword array and invited my master to observe and advise. It was stamped with Sect Leader Yu's seal."

The master he referred to was Zhou Yuandao, the Second Sage of Qinglu Sword Sect. Among the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects, Baopu Sect and Cangya Mountain had long been at odds, but neither had conflicts with other sects. While their relations weren't close, as the highest-level Second Sage, Yu Shi commanded respect from the other two sects. Still, it was puzzling. Yu Shi was said to have been grievously injured by the Sword Sage and would need at least three years to recover. How could he have the will to develop a new sword array?

Yin Biyue frowned. He'd been beside his master at the time and knew the terrifying power behind that seemingly casual flick of a finger. Even with miraculous medicine, Yu Shi's recovery wouldn't be this swift.

"There's nothing wrong with their invitation, is there?"

Cheng Tianyu was talented in the sword, but he was still young and guileless. Plus, he saw Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan as friends. That was why he'd asked so bluntly.

"With the resurgence of the demonic cultivators, crossing the sea and running rampant, every continent has been affected," Luo Mingchuan said after a thoughtful silence. "Everyone knows the immediate priority is to unite against the Twelve Palaces."

"Reasonable," Jun Yu agreed.

The implication was that no matter what Baopu Sect had planned, they wouldn't do anything to destabilize the situation or defy the forces of good. Zhou Yuandao had studied sword arrays for years and was peerless in the field. Yu Shi inviting him to observe his new creation was perfectly logical.

To Yin Biyue, something still felt off.

After some thought, Cheng Tianyu nodded, accepting their reasoning. He shifted the subject. "My sect has over 2,600 disciples, around 1,000 of whom are at the Marrow Purification level, and over 600 at the Spirit Concentration level. On the Southern Continent, more than forty prominent families are affiliated with us. If we go to war with the Twelve Palaces in the south, the battlefront could stretch from the coast to the Tixiang Mountains and the foot of the Qinglu Mountains…"

He shared Qinglu Sword Sect's situation as a gesture of sincerity, as instructed by his elders, to foster alliance.

Once Cheng Tianyu finished, Zhengyangzi only nodded. Luo Mingchuan then detailed Cangya Mountain's circumstances, methodically and clearly stating disciple numbers, cultivation levels, and affiliated clans.

"Our Xiping Peak's elder excels in talisman-making. Communication talismans can be embedded with a concealment array. We are willing to provide Qinglu with two hundred sheets to maintain communication. As for reinforcements, we'll need to assess the specifics once war breaks out…"

Listening, Yin Biyue thought there was no one who understood Cangya Mountain more than his Luo-shixiong.

"But of course," Cheng Tianyu agreed. With his primary mission accomplished, and mindful of the Jin Palace Master's presence in the south and potential upheaval, he prepared to return to Qinglu without delay. He rose and bowed to the rest, then followed an attendant out to collect the talismans.

Zhengyangzi waved off Luo Mingchuan's escort and made his way to the entrance. His steps were sluggish, his back slightly hunched.

"The sky is changing, troubled times ahead…"

Inside the hall, Liu Qishuang took a sheet of white paper out of her sleeve. “A letter came in last night from Wushidi.”

Yin Biyue fell silent. Last night again. How many things had happened last night?!

Chapter 78

"WHAT DID LAO-WU SAY in his letter? When's he coming back? Will he make it for New Year's?" Yan Xing was obviously delighted.

Liu Qishuang shook her head. "I'm afraid not. He's preparing to ascend the throne."

Unlike Yan Xing—whose focus was entirely on *My shidi turned out to be royalty. Now I can drink the imperial cellar's two-hundred-year-old Plum Rain brew to my heart's content, ha ha ha!*—Yin Biyue still couldn't picture Duan Chongxuan in imperial robes, wielding power over the Northern Continent. Even now, hearing his shijie say Duan Chongxuan was about to ascend the throne, all Yin Biyue could imagine was the chatterbox waving his fan and placing bets in gambling halls.

"To my shixiong and shijie, take this letter as if it were me," Liu Qishuang read. "The Northern Continent has entered winter early this year, and the first snow has already fallen. Tea brewed with fresh snow fallen from plum branches tastes exquisite. The cold is especially biting this year. I wonder how things are at Cangya? Has Ershijie added more layers?" She paused. "I'll skip this part. Wushidi sends his regards to everyone."

She flipped directly to the next page. Yin Biyue realized then that Duan Chongxuan had filled an entire page with endless blabbering and couldn't help but chuckle inwardly. How like him.

"The overall situation has stabilized, and the rebels have been purged. However, my father is aging. On the auspicious third day of next month, the Heavenly Worship ceremony will take place, and I will take the throne."

Proper business was only mentioned starting on the last half of the page. Everyone's expressions grew solemn. Only Jun Yu remained unmoved; he'd be unshaken even if Mount Tai collapsed before him.

Jun Yu knew why Duan Chongxuan had come to Cangya. Their master had no personal ties with Duan Sheng'an, but he was acquainted with Headmaster-xiansheng. Thus, he'd accepted the headmaster's

recommendation letter and taken Duan Chongxuan under his tutelage. The matter was complicated, with many factors tied to the Northern Continent's family affairs. But when Duan Chongxuan had made his pledge to their master, he'd become a disciple of Xihua Peak. They all considered him their shidi first; his identity of crown prince was secondary to that. That was how it had been in the past, and how it would be in the future.

Liu Qishuang continued reading the letter. "Seven days ago, the Imperial Guard's Supernatural Division captured four demonic cultivators. They were spies from Zhuo Palace of the Twelve Palaces. The capital is under full lockdown. Recently there have been frequent reports from garrison troops that traces of demonic cultivators have been found along the eastern coastline…"

Demonic cultivators had reached the Northern Continent. Yin Biyue frowned. The Twelve Palaces had always been at odds, yet now they were acting as if they had reached an accord, emerging from the Eastern Continent together.

"I've received word that the Jin Palace Master has left the Snow Plains. The Qiong and Bi palaces are building ships on a large scale to cross the sea. Yao and Zhuo have been interacting closely lately, hinting at an alliance. The palace masters of Hantian and Xishui have taken their subordinates to the Yunxing Abyss and are likely plotting something deeper…"

Yin Biyue had known since the Flower-Plucking Tournament that Duan Chongxuan had unique sources of information, but he hadn't expected the Northern Imperial Capital's intelligence network to be so extraordinary, with such extensive knowledge of the Eastern Continent's situation.

After Liu Qishuang finished reading the letter, she concluded, "He's given no good news, but at least the situation is clearer now. Yu Zhanmei is crossing the South Sea today. I will head down the mountain."

With that, she stood up and strode out of the hall without delay.

Yin Biyue and the others hurried to their feet.

"Shijie!" Yan Xing called after her urgently. "I've heard that witch is cunning and ruthless. Be careful!"

Liu Qishuang's figure swayed briefly but she didn't turn back. She merely waved from afar in acknowledgment.

Standing outside the hall, the group watched as she moved so swiftly it was as if the mountain path beneath her feet had shortened. She reached the end in a flash. Her fighting gear looked particularly dashing against the backdrop of early winter.

When Yin Biyue glanced past Luo Mingchuan, his face still felt warm. Yin Biyue decided to follow Jun Yu and Yan Xing back to Xihua Peak in the end, because he was still unsure how to talk to Luo Mingchuan.

Yin Biyue could clearly feel a gaze on his back. In the past, it had been as gentle as warm sunlight, but now it felt like a blazing flame. Its heat threatened to scorch him.

Jun Yu left for the cliffside to practice his sword.

Before returning to his own courtyard, Yan Xing suddenly turned to face Yin Biyue. "Hey, Lao-si, what's going on between you and Luo Mingchuan?"

Yin Biyue was taken aback. He hadn't expected that the obtuse Yan Xing would notice something was up. Thankfully, Yin Biyue's usual lack of expression served him well. Even if he was nervous on the inside, his face remained as cool as ever.

"There's nothing. I gained many insights during my trip to the Eastern Continent, but since returning to the peak, I'm afraid I haven't been diligent in my cultivation. I plan to go into seclusion for a few days to seek another breakthrough."

The change in topic was forced, but Yan Xing didn't notice. Instead, he clapped Yin Biyue's shoulder.

"Advancing through levels like it's nothing. You're better than I was back then… The younger generation are a force to be reckoned with indeed. This calls for a drink! Ha ha!"

Yan Xing unstrapped the wine gourd from his waist, took a hearty swig, and returned to his courtyard satisfied.

Yin Biyue spent seven days in seclusion and three more days practicing his sword, further solidifying his level. But his mind was

distracted, and there was no hope for a breakthrough. It was best not to force the issue.

When he emerged, he heard Yan Xing had also left the mountain, saying that with chaos erupting everywhere, he wanted to check out the Eastern Continent for himself.

"You should go down the mountain too," said Jun Yu.

Yin Biyue nodded.

Jun Yu controlled half of Cangya's protective array. The grand array required Chunshan Xiao as an anchor when activated, so he couldn't easily leave the mountain. Thus, he was always the one seeing others off the peak.

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LUO MINGCHUAN HAD KEPT BUSY, reviewing jade slips and letters in Qinghe Hall. He had also organized Cangya's disciples into twenty teams based on cultivation level and technique. Some were already patrolling other parts of the Western Continent. However, whenever night fell and all was quiet, once he lit the singular candle, that night would come back to him. The memories filled him with regret. He'd handled the whole incident poorly.

Yin Biyue was inexperienced. Luo Mingchuan should have guided his shidi and explained things slowly. How could he have fled instead?

Other times, he felt that with chaos looming, he shouldn't dwell on such things. Earlier, Cheng Tianyu had come to represent Qinglu Sword Sect and form an alliance. Then, a secret message arrived suggesting something might have gone awry with Zhou Yuandao's visit to Baopu Sect… After discussing the situation with his master, Luo Mingchuan decided to leave the mountain to learn more.

Yin Biyue encountered Luo Mingchuan at the mountain gate. The two stared at each other in the chilly northern wind.

"Shidi, you're going down the mountain too?"

Yin Biyue nodded.

“Do you know where you’re headed?”

Yin Biyue shook his head.

“Shall we go together?”

Yin Biyue wanted to nod again but felt that was too stiff a response. He spoke aloud instead. “I’ll follow you, Shixiong.”

But a frown quickly overtook Yin Biyue’s face. Luo Mingchuan was so upright and proper. His own behavior that night had been so outrageous that Luo Mingchuan had run away. Could he secretly despise Yin Biyue now? Was Luo Mingchuan only extending an invitation out of politeness? Suddenly, Yin Biyue regretted agreeing.

Under normal circumstances, Yin Biyue was too straightforward to worry like this, but his mind was stuck in turmoil. Those in the middle of a situation never see it objectively, after all.

Luo Mingchuan had no idea of Yin Biyue’s tangled thoughts. Hearing Yin Biyue’s words just made him chuckle fondly. “Well then, let’s go.”

Suppressing the upturn of his lips, Yin Biyue lowered his eyes and took a few steps closer. He even forgot to ask where they were going.

It didn’t matter. Luo Mingchuan explained everything while they walked. “The Second Sage from Qinglu went to Baopu Sect but hasn’t sent any word back. The sect’s high-level elders are trapped in the Southern Continent by demonic cultivators from the Xishui Palace. Zhong Shan, Song Tang, and others have also been held up. There are too many coincidences… We’ll go to Baopu Sect first. Time is of the essence, so I plan to cut straight through the Mighty Mountains.”

The Mighty Mountains formed the boundary between the north and south halves of the Western Continent, and also marked the jurisdictional divide between Cangya and Baopu Sect. The terrain was treacherous, teeming with fierce beasts and brigands, so most cultivators would detour around it. However, given their current cultivation levels, those dangers posed no threat.

“Whatever you say, Shixiong,” Yin Biyue said with a nod.

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BAOPU SECT HAD NINE PALACES and twelve temples. Incense burned year-round in the halls, the curling smoke making the golden tiles and upturned eaves of the distant pavilions appear hazy. Only the highest peak of the Hengduan Mountains was free of smoke. A sea of spiraling clouds surrounded it instead.

A Daoist in his middle age stood atop those clouds. His eyes were half lidded in his pale face. His robes billowed in the wind, and his hair was somewhat disheveled.

To those of sufficient cultivation, it was clear that what surrounded him wasn't fierce wind, but countless streaks of sword qi. The sword qi zigzagged above the clouds, yet the Daoist stood firm as a mountain.

"Zhou Yuandao, you've got some skill…" The voice carried a hint of mockery as it drifted over from the mountaintop beyond the clouds like a light and airy breeze. But when it dropped, it crashed like thunder. Wind and smoke surged across the clouds to clash with the rapid-fire sword qi, sending rumbling echoes over a hundred-mile radius. At the center of this storm, the Daoist's face grew paler.

Meanwhile, Yu Shi, who most believed had been severely injured by the Sword Sage, stood unharmed atop the mountain. Hands clasped behind his back, he stared impassively at the center of the clouds.

However, he wasn't the one who had spoken a moment ago. *That* had been the figure seated on a pine branch jutting from the cliffside. Cloaked entirely in black, he lounged as if he were relaxing in his own backyard and admiring the view.

Killing a Second Sage was a very difficult endeavor. Success held immense significance, but failure carried equally grave consequences. Thus, Yu Shi and his ally had prepared thoroughly. Zhou Yuandao would never leave the Hengduan Mountains alive.

With an arrow's precision, a streak of black pierced through the clouds and landed beside the black-cloaked figure. It was a crow. The black-cloaked man took the short missive, read it several times, and laughed

wildly when he was satisfied. The crow transformed back into a streak as it flew away.

The grating laughter shook the sea of clouds. Even Yu Shi, the cloaked man's ally, frowned. The man twitched his hand, and the slip appeared in Yu Shi's.

The perpetually expressionless Yu Shi allowed a stiff smile to cross his face when he read the message: *Chu Huan succeeded. Chen Yi returned too late. Qu Jiang is dead. Lianjian is divided.*

The slip crumbled to dust, then scattered in the fierce mountain wind.

They didn't care about Chu Huan or Chen Yi. But Qu Jiang was dead, the Northern Emperor's end was near, and Zhou Yuandao would fall soon. Who could have guessed that in just half a month, three of the world's six Second Sages would be gone? The timing, the location, and the people were all working in their favor. The scheme was exquisite, evading even Headmaster-xiansheng's calculations and the Omniscient Eye of Jiekong Temple's Master Wuwang. Now that the state of the world was set, no variables could threaten them.

What does it matter if it's the Age of Stars? Yu Shi thought. Their juniors were still too young, too inexperienced. He had finally ushered in an era without Wei Jingfeng. Yu Shi alone stood at the pinnacle of the world. How could he not be exhilarated?

As his emotions surged, demonic qi rushed out of him. A black shadow engulfed the entire mountain range.

Amid the dark winds and sinister clouds, Zhou Yuandao opened his eyes. His gaze flashed like lightning, sundering the demonic qi. He spoke with words that cut like blades.

"Yu Shi! Not only have you colluded with demonic cultivators, you've entered the demonic path yourself! Heaven will not tolerate you!"

Yu Shi scowled. Zhou Yuandao's words meant nothing to Yu Shi, but the man was stronger than he'd anticipated.

Though they'd seemed motionless all this time, they were in fact locked in combat. The grand Sea of Clouds array clashed with the crisscrossing sword qi. Zhou Yuandao's Qinglu-Anchoring sword had been

damaged and his sword qi weakened, but he wasn’t at the end of his rope yet.

Yu Shi ran out of patience. He glanced at the pine branch by the cliff. “What are you waiting for?” he demanded.

The black-cloaked man chuckled.

Chapter 79

LIANJIAN WAS THE NAME OF a major sect, but also of a place located at the easternmost edge of the Central Continent. Perennially drenched in rain, it boasted over a hundred waterfalls and cascades of varying sizes. Even before reaching the mountains, one could hear the thunderous roar of water. Mist from the falls blended with drifting clouds, while lush green and golden-red foliage intertwined in the forest canopy. When Lianjian Sect disciples traversed the ridges clad in their purple robes, the landscape became even more vibrant.

Today, not a single figure walked the planked paths or the wooden bridges, not a soul lingered in the white-walled, gray-tiled houses, and not a single human voice danced through the air. The waterfalls crashed and churned as always, but the atmosphere was stagnant.

The Lianjian disciples had gathered in Taixu Hall. The spacious chamber was packed so tightly that not a breath of wind could pass through. The area outside was equally crowded. As if by unspoken agreement, however, the very center of the hall remained left empty. A fair-skinned, beautiful young woman stood there in a face-off against over a dozen people.

“Shimei, I fear the shock has been too much for you. Your heart is exhausted, and your mind muddled,” Chu Huan said evenly.

Despite the upheaval, not a single strand of his hair or fold of his robe was out of place. His appearance made him seem as reliable as the hills around them. As Qu Jiang’s eldest disciple, his demeanor mirrored his master’s—gentle and calm as water. Even when delivering reproachful words, he exuded an air of authority.

As soon as he spoke, others voiced their agreement.

“Indeed, Qu-shizhi. You cannot make such accusations lightly. You claim Chu-shizhi killed your parents, but do you have any proof?”

“We are all deeply grieved by the passing of Sage Qu and Sect Leader Liu… But right now, Lianjian Sect must rely on Chu-shizhi to lead.”

“Spreading baseless rumors and sowing discord, what are you thinking?!”

The speakers were several sect elders with high seniority whose cultivation far surpassed Chu Huan’s. They stood behind him, tacitly acknowledging his leadership. The other disciples in the hall wore various expressions—some convinced, others skeptical. For now, no one spoke.

Normally, sect affairs were managed by Chu Huan and Chen Yi. Compared to the reclusive sect leader and the Second Sage, these two enjoyed immense prestige among the disciples. With Chen Yi absent, the situation was entirely Chu Huan’s to command.

Qu Duiyan didn’t understand.

She didn’t understand why Chu Huan, who had entered the sect before she was born and was treated like a son by her parents, would do such a thing. Poison, ambush, and other such underhanded tactics—had her father not trusted him fully, how could any trap, no matter how cunning, have deceived a Second Sage?

She didn’t understand why the elders, so kind yesterday, were ready to spin blistering lies today.

She didn’t understand how the world could turn upside down overnight.

She might have been gifted and sharp-witted, but she was still a young girl—one who had always lived under her parents’ sheltering wings. How could she comprehend the unpredictability of human hearts, or how their insatiable greed could overcome gratitude?

Qu Duiyan tightened her grip on her sword, her knuckles white. Grief and rage filled her to the brim, bordering on despair. She stared straight into Chu Huan’s eyes. Before her once-familiar, now-terrifying shixiong, she did not take a single step back.

“What goes around, comes around. The sun and moon bear witness. You know what you’ve done!”

Chu Huan didn’t bother to argue. “But,” he said softly, “who would believe you?”

No one spoke. The great hall was horribly silent.

Which was why, when a voice rang out, it was all the clearer, as if everyone in Lianjian could hear it.

“I believe her. I believe Shijie.”

The crowd parted as Chen Yi approached the hall’s entrance. The heavy stench of blood followed in his wake. His robes were torn, his crown askew, his appearance unkempt and travel-worn. Yet his eyes were clear and resolute. Whatever the harm to his body, the ambushes and assassination attempts along his journey had not weakened his spirit in the slightest.

When Qu Duiyan saw him, she felt the sudden urge to weep.

Chu Huan’s expression shifted. He’d known every trap laid along the route from the Western Continent to Lianjian, yet Chen Yi had managed to return. This was a variable not accounted for.

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THE WUYIN SNOW PLAINS of the Eastern Continent was a place without seasons. It had no winter or summer, no spring or autumn. Only the bleak, frozen whiteness of eternal ice and snow. From the gloomy skies, heavy snow fell thick and fast enough to bury a person in minutes. Today, the conditions on the plains were particularly harsh.

A troop of black-cloaked figures advanced through the blizzard, their forms flashing as they traversed hundreds of feet with every movement.

The one in the lead halted and glanced at the snowy peak nearby. With his level of cultivation, he could perceive the array and the palace atop it.

Someone knelt at his feet.

“Palace Master, shall we proceed to the Tongtian Snow Peaks?”

Their leader shook his head. “No.”

He adored the throne inside Jin Palace. It had been left behind by the Demon Lord a million years ago. How could someone like Yu Zhanmei be worthy of it? But he was also pressed for time, so much so that he had no leisure to indulge his desires, not even one so close at hand.

He was headed to the Yunxing Abyss, to be the first to forge a contract with the demonic beings at the bottom. If this grand endeavor succeeded, not only would the Demonic Dominion be restored, but the world itself would also fall within his grasp.

He never expected that when he crossed the Minchuan River and arrived at the edge of the abyss, someone would already be waiting for him there.

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“YU ZHANMEI HAS REACHED the Western Continent.”

“Lianjian Sect has split into northern and southern factions.”

“The Hantian and Xishui Palaces have gone to the Yunxing Abyss after hearing the rumors we released, and have perished there.”

“A rebellion will rise on the third day of next month on the Northern Continent.”

“…”

On the highest peak in the Hengduan Mountains, the black-robed man lounging on a pine branch received messages from all directions. Some he shared with Yu Shi; some he did not. Chu Huan’s betrayal at Lianjian and the rebellion of the Prince of Xian on the Northern Continent had been orchestrated by his hand. He’d lured Yu Zhanmei to the Western Continent. He’d spread rumors of the demonic beings of the Yunxing Abyss. All living beings were his pawns on the board, their every move a part of his game.

Not everything had gone according to plan, though. Headmaster-xiansheng had not fallen for his scheme, and had visited neither the

Northern Continent nor Lianjian Sect. The younger generation of Qinglu Sword Sect had likewise proven more capable than expected, and Qu Jiang's other disciple still lived.

Then there were those two stars.

But these were trivialities. Those who achieved great things never worried about minor details. Be it the Demon Lord or the True Immortal, they were tales from a million years ago. In this Age of Stars, they had no place on the stage.

Seated on the branch, gazing at the clouds, he had never found the world so vast and beautiful.

"What are you waiting for?" Yu Shi demanded.

The man couldn't help but laugh. He was not waiting—he was savoring the process of ascending step-by-step to the pinnacle. Nevertheless, it was time to move on.

He rose. The pine branch beneath his feet did not so much as tremble. There was no overwhelming surge of demonic qi, only a faint crimson mist that diffused from his almost-translucent fingertips. It wafted toward the sea of clouds above.

Zhou Yuandao unleashed countless blasts of sword qi, slicing through the layers of clouds and mist. To any observer below, it would seem as though the sky itself had torn in half. He was desperate and near his limits, but he held on. The moment he saw the black-robed man make a move, his eyes flashed with fury and his chest heaved. His outrage eclipsed even his reaction upon confirming Yu Shi's fall to demonic cultivation.

"*Rong Zhuo!* You demon! How did you not die at Xiling Mountain?!"

The Battle of Xiling Mountain a century ago had been the only major conflict to erupt since the Great Dao-Demon War. At the time, Yu Zhanmei was just starting out. The true target of the campaign had been Rong Zhuo and his Qiong Palace, not her.

Back then, Rong Zhuo had reached the Omen level, equivalent to a Second Sage. With his power, he'd sought to unify the Demonic Dominion and had launched an expedition across the sea to conquer the other four continents. In the million years since the Demonic Dominion's fracture, its

factions had always remained divided. Rong Zhuo was the only figure with both the power and ambition to threaten the world's balance.

Thus, Cangya, Qinglu, and Lianjian had formed an alliance and marched on Xiling Mountain. Liu Qishuang, then just descending from the Cangya Mountains, joined the campaign.

After the battle, everyone assumed Rong Zhuo had perished. Zhou Yuandao had personally witnessed his heart shatter. Left in the hands of Rong Zhuo's disciples, who accomplished little over the years, the Qiong Palace declined. By comparison, Jin Palace's splendor drew far more attention. As time passed, people remembered only the battle's brutality and forgot why it had been fought in the first place.

But some dared not forget.

When that wisp of crimson mist drifted toward Zhou Yuandao, for a fleeting moment, he felt as though he'd returned to Xiling Mountain, to the sea of corpses and blood—to his younger days.

Before this, he'd fought with reservation, conserving his vital qi as he dealt with Yu Shi's Sea of Clouds array. He'd held on, fighting for every additional second, not in hopes that the other Second Sages would come to his aid, but that *anyone* would come slay the now-demonic Yu Shi. This new revelation changed things. If the black-robed man was Rong Zhuo, there might be no one who could beat him. Zhou Yuandao might as well go all out.

Zhou Yuandao raised his right hand as though gripping an invisible sword. Countless beams of sword qi converged around him, the sound of them shredding through the air like the screams of dying birds. Although his Qinglu-Anchoring sword had been destroyed, he was still alive—the heart of the sword remained.

Solemnly, Zhou Yuandao swung his formless blade at the wisp of crimson mist.

Rong Zhuo had merely lifted a finger, yet Zhou Yuandao had responded with grand retaliation, because within that wisp of mist lay a terrifying, supreme power. It neared the threshold of a Sage.

Not only had Rong Zhuo survived, his power far surpassed what it had been in the past.

The mist dispersed under the sword's strike. Faint crimson scattered across the sea of clouds. Like a drop of ink in clear water, it spread soundlessly but swiftly, staining the sky red for a hundred miles. A trickle of blood seeped from Zhou Yuandao's lips. The clouds roiling beneath his feet were now a sea of blood.

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BAOPU SECT'S DISCIPLES LOOKED UP to find the sky had become veiled by an expanse of foul red clouds. It wasn't the vibrant hues of sunset, but a pure, bloody scarlet, as though gore might rain from the heavens at any moment. Those with weaker cultivation felt their eyes burning after a single glance, and they cried out in alarm.

He Lai rebuked them. "The sect leader is battling demonic cultivators on top of the mountain! Nothing to worry about!"

The disciples hastily agreed and scattered, not daring to ask questions. He Lai turned to the man beside him, his expression deferential.

"Dashixiong, the elders have forbidden anyone from ascending the peak today because of the major event happening there."

The man frowned slightly but didn't respond.

He Lai's face stiffened, but he didn't dare to say more.

Suddenly, the wind picked up. From the firmament above, a streak of light sliced through the crimson clouds and drifted gently down. Like a candle's flame brightening the long night, it drew all eyes. The man reached out, and the light landed precisely on his fingertip like a feather. Pure, white, unblemished.

The next instant, the crimson clouds were shredded layer by layer. Amid startled exclamations, thousands upon thousands of feathers fluttered down, enveloping all of Baopu Sect's nine palaces and twelve temples. His suspicions confirmed, the man strode up the mountain path, ignoring warnings and attempts to stop him.

***

ZHOU YUANDAO STOOD in the sea of blood, his consciousness also submerged in the viscous, nauseating stench surrounding him. His cheeks were sunken, his complexion ashen. His earlier strike was never meant to sever the wisp of mist. It was meant to unleash his sword.

Ten thousand beams of sword glare poured forth, breaching the sea of blood, like radiant feathers alighting on the pine branch at the cliff's edge.

Cheng Tianyu had once demonstrated the same attack at the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Its might have been astonishing then, but that was a mere flicker compared to what was displayed now.

This was the sword of a Second Sage in his youth. The culmination of a lifetime's cultivation and glory. Splendid feathers descended from the heavens—exceedingly beautiful; exceedingly deadly.

Rong Zhuo's pine branch snapped as he faced this strike head-on. His impenetrable black robes shredded to pieces, revealing his true form at last. He blurred and reappeared above the sea of blood, his black hair whipping in the air, his red inner robes darker than the blood below.

***

IN EARLY WINTER, the Mighty Mountains were already bitterly cold. The wind cut like knives, the frost-laden skies were bleak, and the ground was buried under thick layers of fallen leaves. Many of the fierce beasts had long since retreated to their dens, ready for a long season of hibernation. Then again, the most fearsome things here were never the beasts.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan fended off the mountain's endless dangers and pressed forward without pause. By the time they emerged, they were visibly fatigued.

In the distance, the sky was stained with bloodred clouds and streaked with feather-like light. Eighty miles from Baopu Sect, they found

someone directly in their path. He was clad in cyan robes, wore his hair tied back, and had an impassive expression. He had been waiting for some time —the sword in his hand was lightly frosted over. Such foresight and patience were not the marks of a welcoming party.

To encounter someone lying in wait beyond the mountains was never a good thing, especially when every second counted.

Yin Biyue frowned.

Chapter 80

YIN BIYUE COULD SAY with certainty that something momentous was unfolding in the Hengduan Mountains, something that would alter the world. With his current cultivation and at such a distance, he couldn't discern the laws of the universe acting within the red clouds and feather light. But it wasn't necessary. He could sense the terrifying power emanating from them regardless.

Yu Shi had invited Zhou Yuandao to Baopu Sect under the pretense of observing a sword array. Now, a battle of incredible magnitude was raging atop the mountain. The worst-case scenario Qinglu Sword Sect feared had come to pass.

Luo Mingchuan saw even more. He knew their only choice was to ascend the mountain as quickly as possible, even if their efforts proved futile. A battle of this level was not something they could face in their current state, but every additional ounce of strength, every second bought, might create a vital opening. There was no time to waste, but someone was blocking their way.

A cold glint flashed through Luo Mingchuan's eyes. He rarely showed emotion, so Yin Biyue could tell his shixiong was truly angry.

The one in their path was someone they knew. In Ye City, they'd made friends—noble friendships, elegant and pure as water—and they'd encountered enemies—murderous blades pointed at their backs.

Zheng Wei stood in the middle of the road, cradling his sword.

After Zheng Wei had been injured by City Master Ye, he'd returned to his sect and entered a life-or-death seclusion. Such seclusion carried an extreme risk of death, yet he'd emerged alive, and his cultivation had advanced by leaps and bounds.

Luo Mingchuan reached for his sword, but Yin Biyue stayed his hand.

“I think you want to kill me even more than you want to obey your sect’s orders,” Yin Biyue said.

Zheng Wei had been stationed here to intercept anyone attempting to disrupt Baopu Sect’s affairs tonight. Perhaps every path leading up the mountain had someone lying in wait. It was simply their bad luck to happen upon Zheng Wei. Or maybe it was Zheng Wei’s good fortune to land in their path.

Yin Biyue expected no response, but to his surprise, Zheng Wei answered: “Correct.” Even when speaking of murder, his voice remained flat, devoid of emotion.

“But you can’t kill me right now, because there are two of us,” Yin Biyue continued.

Zheng Wei nodded.

Luo Mingchuan was too strong, even though Zheng Wei had survived the life-or-death seclusion. On the surface, the difference between their cultivation wasn’t notable, but Zheng Wei understood the gap between them. His assessment stemmed from an intuition honed by years of killing.

“If you want to kill me, there’s only one way,” Yin Biyue said. “Let my shixiong pass first. Otherwise, the two of us together are enough to beat you.”

Zheng Wei remained silent but seemed to consider this.

Luo Mingchuan frowned. He had remained silent out of respect for Yin Biyue, but this approach left him on edge.

Yin Biyue kept his hand pressed over Luo Mingchuan’s, his expression resolute. Yin Biyue knew why Luo Mingchuan was hesitant, but the event on the mountain really couldn’t wait. If they were together, they could undoubtedly defeat Zheng Wei. However, they would have to kill him, and that would waste too much time.

“Shixiong, you said you believe in me. Now I believe in myself. This is something I want to handle alone,” Yin Biyue said quietly.

He had presented Zheng Wei with a choice: Follow sect orders and try to stop them both or fulfill his personal desire to kill the one he wanted to kill.

Zheng Wei moved. His cyan robes fluttered slightly as he stepped three paces to the right, yielding the center of the road. He'd made his choice.

Yin Biyue had guessed right. For a madman like Zheng Wei, Yu Shi's schemes and the world's upheaval meant nothing.

Slowly, Yin Biyue released Luo Mingchuan's hand and shot him a pleading look. Luo Mingchuan took some time before he nodded. His figure blurred and vanished on the spot, reappearing over a hundred feet away in the blink of an eye.

Zheng Wei didn't react. It was as if he hadn't noticed.

From their meeting to Luo Mingchuan's departure and the rapid calculations that had flashed through their minds, only a few minutes had passed. In Yin Biyue's opinion, it was a relief.

Diplomacy really is much faster than fighting. He was still worried that Zheng Wei might change his mind, though, so he stalled a bit longer.

"Why do you want to kill me so badly?"

Yin Biyue's master had killed Zheng Wei's master; Baopu Sect had been humiliated at the Flower-Plucking Tournament; and at that same time, someone had needed to probe whether the Sword Sage would emerge from the Yunxing Abyss. These were all reasons Zheng Wei had gone to Ye City.

Although Zheng Wei's killing intent had been tempered like a sheathed blade with its edge concealed, Yin Biyue could sense it clearly after his time in the Eastern Continent's wastelands. He had learned there that restraint wasn't always surrender—sometimes, it was just preparation.

What Yin Biyue didn't understand was where this obsession with killing him came from. He knew Zheng Wei was a madman. Once he'd attained the Spirit Concentration level at fourteen, he killed whenever he hit a mental block or his cultivation met a bottleneck. But why not choose someone else to kill? Killing Yin Biyue was no easy task, and even if Zheng Wei succeeded, Cangya would never let him go.

"I failed to kill who I wanted to kill, and now I cannot rest," Zheng Wei answered. "If I don't kill you, my Dao will remain unfulfilled. That is more unbearable to me than death."

Yin Biyue had no words.

He realized Zheng Wei actually had his own twisted logic, though it was logic Yin Biyue couldn't accept. In truth, when he'd let Luo Mingchuan go ahead, it hadn't been out of some noble, world-saving sentiment. He had simply remembered his master.

The only thing Shifu taught me was the art of killing. Therefore, as his disciple, I must reply. Having no retort would make him upset.

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AFTER SOME THOUGHT, Yin Biyue said, "All this talk about perfecting your Dao, but aren't you just picking the low-hanging fruit? Don't tell me you've never wanted to kill the Sages or your shixiong Lin Yuangui? Yet you only dream about it because you know you'd fail. You're scared. Your Dao will never be fulfilled."

Boom!

Zheng Wei's sword qi slashed down. The ground quaked and a fissure split open, sending dirt and stones flying amid clouds of dust. Yin Biyue leaped into the air, advancing instead of retreating, Yihu already drawn. A flash of cold air split the dust clouds and the shrill sound of the air itself tearing rang out.

Yin Biyue's expression was calm as still water. All his talk *had* succeeded in angering Zheng Wei.

During the ranking of Baopu's Seven, Zheng Wei had challenged Lin Yuangui. After losing, he grew embittered and went on to slaughter three hundred brigands. Yin Biyue remembered Duan Chongxuan telling him the story back in Ye City. Rage could amplify power, but in life-or-death battles where every movement counted, anger exposed openings.

Shhk!

Yihu pierced through Zheng Wei's shoulder, and blood sprayed forth. The strike couldn't have been called a proper technique; it was straightforward, without flourish or aesthetics. What it did have was

fearsome speed, impressive vital qi output, and a meticulously calculated angle. Had Zheng Wei not twisted aside at the last second to protect his heart, he would have been dead already.

Yin Biyue had opened with a killing strike. After his patient rambling earlier, even he was itching for a fight. Upon the release of his attack, his whole body felt lighter.

His concentration was approaching its peak, his second strike gathering momentum. A cold wind swept across the land, and the sky darkened. Red clouds glared above them, like the heavens themselves were being scorched. Eight miles out from Baopu Sect, the road frosted over, and the air bore a biting winter chill. This was the Coldwater Blade.

Striking only after the enemy had moved, deceptively fast despite seeming slow from the outside—from the moment Yin Biyue had started speaking to Zheng Wei to this sudden attack, the battle's rhythm had been within his grasp.

With Yihu's chilling edge at his brow, Zheng Wei backed up a hundred feet. Mid-retreat, his sword tip manifested the rotating array of Baopu's Eight Trigrams. The blade moved along the Xun position, thrusting at an angle to form a streak of light aimed straight between Yin Biyue's eyes. This was not a real withdrawal; rather than defend himself, Zheng Wei had chosen to trade blows while in motion. If the Coldwater Blade's momentum didn't pull back, the Eight Trigrams Sword would wound its target.

To kill eight hundred enemies at the cost of a thousand of one's own—a madman with no fear of death was a terrifying force. But after emerging from the wastelands, Yin Biyue was also fearless in the face of the end.

Yihu pressed forward like winter's relentless descent upon the land. The frost on the ground spread rapidly, ice sealing the withered grass and trees along the road. A thin layer of frost crystallized on Yin Biyue's brows and lashes. Finally, the ice on Yihu's tip froze the blood around the wound near Zheng Wei's heart.

Zheng Wei was stunned.

He’d known defeat was a possibility because his opponent was no longer the defenseless youth at Qiushui Lake, about to enter a breakthrough. But he couldn’t believe he never had the chance to unleash a third attack.

His Eight Trigrams Sword clutched in his hand, Zheng Wei toppled backward, pupils dilated, unable to close his eyes. He still knew many sword techniques, still carried many spiritual devices—but none of it mattered anymore.

Yin Biyue slid Yihu back in its sheath as he walked past without another word.

His steps were slow. He’d poured all of his vital qi into that strike, leaving him nearly drained. Glancing at the sky, he thought Luo Mingchuan should have reached the mountain by now.

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THAT EVENING, the red clouds over the Hengduan Mountains were visible across the Western Continent. To casual observers, they resembled a vibrant sunset with feather-like light streaming between the cloud layers. It was only after night had fallen and the twilight hues refused to fade that those watching found the redness increasingly unsettling. Some grew frightened, unable to train or meditate, though they couldn’t think of anything to do beyond pray. Most ordinary folks didn’t understand what was happening. They merely stared at the spectacular sight in confusion, whispering among themselves.

Yu Shi thought it was all over now. His calculations were foolproof, and there were no variables left. Zhou Yuandao’s sword technique was formidable, but its momentum was running out. Rong Zhuo had been correct: It was necessary to eliminate Zhou Yuandao first. With such steadfast resolve and strength, far surpassing their expectations, he would have been a major impediment if left alive.

Above the sea of blood, Zhou Yuandao was barely standing. The clear light around him had begun to disperse. Finally, he coughed up a mouthful of blood and dropped to his knees. Heartblood.

Rong Zhuo’s ink-black hair was loose and tousled around his shoulders. He smirked. Although it was a casual quirk of the lips, the expression was sinister when combined with his bloodred robes.

Before his smirk could fade, it abruptly twisted into a frown. He looked up toward the clouds.

Yu Shi also sensed it. He followed his eyes to where Rong Zhuo had fixed his gaze. Yu Shi’s impassive face shifted with surprise.

From beyond the sea of clouds came an immense, oppressive might —the might of a Second Sage.

Impossible.

But what surprised them more was that the thing to arrive at the mountaintop was neither Headmaster-xiansheng’s stone seal nor Master Wuwang’s wooden prayer beads. It was a man—a mere junior who should have had no place in this battle.

His breathing was ragged, his Daoist robes stained with blood. Clearly, many had tried to stop him on his way up.

The fact that he was here now meant no one below could hinder him anymore.

Chapter 81

THE KILLING PLOT HATCHED AMID the Hengduan Mountains had been meticulously prepared, with its countless threads woven into an impenetrable net. The sect's mountain protective array had been pushed to its limits, and every path to Baopu Sect had been set with guards to intercept outsiders, while patrols and sentries on the mountains had been ten times stricter than usual.

This was enough to stop most cultivators, but not enough to block a Second Sage riding on the wind.

"That scholar from the academy may have high cultivation and a mind full of tricks, but what a pity—he can't even hold a sword. Nothing to worry about. And Jiekong Temple has always avoided worldly affairs. Wuwang is too detached. He cares little about who rules the world, whether they're demons or Daoists…"

These were the words Rong Zhuo had said to Yu Shi a long time ago, his voice brimming with the unrestrained arrogance of someone who looked down on everyone.

Despite their arrogance, Rong Zhuo and Yu Shi had modified the Sea of Clouds array to counter Second Sages. They'd concealed their auras, confounded heaven's design, and diverted the gazes of the two Second Sages toward the Yunxing Abyss. If Headmaster-xiansheng and Master Wuwang were to show up, they had created contingencies. They would have to pay a price, but the two could be delayed as long as necessary.

The dark night was vast, empty of stars and the moon, while the red clouds emanated ominous light.

Rong Zhuo watched with a cold expression as Headmaster-xiansheng's stone seal materialized in front of them. While the headmaster hadn't shown, his seal alone could traverse ten thousand miles in an instant, tearing an opening through the sea of blood in the blink of an eye. The mountainous stone seal cast a shadow over the blood sea, its might bearing

down with tremendous pressure. With Baopu Sect's mountain protective array channeling the power of heaven and earth, the stone seal shouldn't have arrived so quickly.

Yu Shi, struck with a sudden unease, focused on the man who'd come to the summit. "Do you mean to betray your masters?" he asked with a frown.

His tone wasn't harsh, but the strength of his words fell like a sword. Blood trickled from the corner of the man's mouth.

He hadn't blocked Yu Shi's strike, merely accepted it.

Rong Zhuo's sleeves whipped with the wind as his hands formed seals that stirred monstrous waves in the blood sea. He could break the stone seal; he only needed time. But the longer he took, the more variables could arise. Zhou Yuandao was back on his feet again.

Despite the urgency, Yu Shi softened his expression as he spoke to the man who had come. "This matter doesn't concern you. Go back down the mountain." His meaning was clear: *You don't belong here. If you leave now, I'll let it go.*

For someone of Yu Shi's status and power, this was the greatest concession he could make. Most would have accepted it with tears of gratitude.

The man didn't move. The rancid wind blown from the sea of blood lifted his dark cyan robes.

Yu Shi had never imagined the greatest variable would be Lin Yuangui.

Just as Jun Yu controlled half of Cangya's protective array, Lin Yuangui commanded half of Baopu Sect's. He hadn't known about tonight's plot, nor was he skilled in divination, but his cultivation had allowed him to glean clues from the red clouds and feather light. Despite Yu Shi's orders forbidding anyone from ascending the mountain peak tonight, He Lai hadn't dared stop Lin Yuangui, nor could the elders restrain him. He'd reached the summit, seen the sea of blood, then weakened the protective array without a moment's hesitation.

Yu Shi wasn't Lin Yuangui's master; they shared no teacher-disciple bond. However, Lin Yuangui's value to the sect was too great to simply throw away. He couldn't die now. At the very least, he should do something for the sect.

"Now that you've grown so capable, you'd forget your roots and turn traitor against your masters?" Yu Shi said.

Another fierce sword intent pierced through Lin Yuangui's midriff. Blood coursed from the wound, but Lin Yuangui didn't flinch. He neither blocked nor retreated. He refused to block not because Yu Shi was a Second Sage, but because the man was his sect elder. And he didn't retreat because of his principles. Having been in seclusion for years, he didn't know why the sect leader would collude with demonic cultivators to kill Zhou Yuandao. He only knew it was wrong. Regardless of the reasons, wrong was wrong.

Yu Shi's face grew as stormy as the sea of blood. He raised his hand, about to fling this ungrateful wretch down the mountain.

Abruptly, Yu Shi vanished, sparing Lin Yuangui. He reappeared some distance away. Rong Zhuo had abandoned fighting the stone seal and Zhou Yuandao and moved to the summit instead. Yu Shi didn't know why, but he'd seen the shift and taken his ally's place.

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WITH BAOPU SECT'S protective array weakened and the obstacles on the road cleared by Lin Yuangui, Luo Mingchuan reached the summit with little effort. When he tried to take one step further, he found his path blocked by a figure ahead—a demonic cultivator.

The demonic cultivator was clad in robes so fiery red that they drowned out the color of the bloody sea behind him. He exuded malevolence, yet his demeanor was relaxed and his aura concealed. Zhou Yuandao's face was haggard, while Yu Shi had his sword drawn. He was being slowly forced back by the encroaching stone seal. At the most

inconspicuous western edge of the mountaintop was a man in cyan robes, standing tall and firm as a proud tree.

With one glance, Luo Mingchuan grasped most of the situation and the identities of those present.

Rong Zhuo studied Luo Mingchuan in turn. Mediocre. What a disappointment. How could this unremarkable youth be the Demon Lord's reincarnation? Where was the mightiness to dominate the world? Too weak.

Disappointment bred impatience. Rong Zhuo's attitude shifted to one of dismissing an ant. "You're unworthy of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net," he declared.

Luo Mingchuan shook his head. "I disdain it."

This Rong Zhuo found interesting. The Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net was the ultimate art every demonic cultivator sought. Eternal life—the pinnacle of power attainable. Yet this ant he could crush with a finger claimed to disdain it?

He smiled, eerie and cold. "Why not give it to me, then."

It wasn't a request.

As soon as he uttered the words, a wisp of crimson mist wafted over. A sea of blood and a mountain of corpses appeared before Luo Mingchuan. They flooded his eyes, then his mind. Just like when he'd been pulled into Liaoguan's meditation realm, *this* was the power of a supreme fighter. Rong Zhuo's will had breached Luo Mingchuan's subconscious directly.

Compared to Yu Zhanmei, Rong Zhuo desired the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net far more. Cold killing intent, violent rage, silent death, resentment, unwillingness, despair… The blood contained all the world's suffering, drowning every spark of goodness and beauty. It was enough to evoke one's deepest fears.

Luo Mingchuan felt a sharp pain between his brows that split his head like a lightning strike. He saw Cangya's destruction: his master, his shidi and shimei, all who were like family to him. They died, one after another. He stood inside a ruined Qinghe Hall.

Suddenly, someone cried out, "Demon!" He turned and came to the startling realization that he was the one holding the sword.

The bloodscape changed. The final scene showed Xingshan Temple, his shidi dying to shield him while he could do nothing.

Luo Mingchuan's face paled, and his back became drenched in cold sweat. The inside of his head roiled until it threatened to boil over. The viscous blood enveloped him, filling his lungs with a fetid stench. He couldn't breathe. He would drown in this sea of gore.

Suddenly, a brilliant sword glare cleaved through the clouds and night, hit the blood sea, and raised towering waves. A strike moonlight bright, casting clarity across thousands of miles.

Rong Zhuo turned his eyes to the attacker. He hadn't cared for this junior before, but now his desire to crush Lin Yuangui had been stirred.

Lin Yuangui had been silent tonight. Yu Shi's actions had shattered all his understandings of the past. Hearing that he was "forgetting his roots" and "turning traitor" weighed heavily on him. He didn't understand. Was "Maintain purity and simplicity of heart; abstain from selfish distractions" not the founding tenet of their sect? Was Baopu—*embrace simplicity*—not their very name? How had he become a traitor?

He couldn't draw his sword against the elders of his sect, but he could against a demonic cultivator.

He'd sustained internal injuries from Yu Shi's two sword qi strikes. Since then, he'd been gathering power for the one he'd just released. He'd poured every drop of his vital qi into it. Against Rong Zhuo, he could only strike once. He had only one chance.

A hairline fissure appeared in Rong Zhuo's sea of blood. His casual smirk vanished as he pointed his finger toward the sword wielder—only to meet a pair of eyes.

Black as the night, deep as the abyss.

Luo Mingchuan had broken free.

In an instant, the blood sea reversed its tide. Rong Zhuo fell into a darkness as primordial and pure as when heaven and earth first divided at the beginning of time.

The bottom of the Yunxing Abyss.

Rong Zhuo was incredulous. He'd been pulled into someone else's realm?! Demonic beings surged toward him, tearing at his flesh.

He didn't feel any pain; a strange excitement seized him. Was this the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net? The Demon Lord's reincarnation?

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THE HEADMASTER'S STONE SEAL shattered into fine powder under Yu Shi's sword qi, yet the fragments hung suspended in the air. Yu Shi sensed a shift at the summit. He tried to disengage, but froze at the sight of someone approaching through the sky.

Tall hat, broad sash, and robes flowing freely—it was Headmaster-xiansheng.

He considered himself a scholar and did not know how to wield a sword. As said in *Dao De Jing*, "Weapons bring misfortune; a scholar uses them only as a last resort." Regardless, Headmaster-xiansheng supported Zhou Yuandao.

If this had been the past, Headmaster-xiansheng's combat prowess couldn't have matched Yu Shi's. But tonight, Yu Shi had expended too much energy. Both his mental strength and sword intent were far from their peak. After Wei Jingfeng severely injured him, Yu Shi had rebuilt his meridians with Rong Zhuo's help, falling into the demonic path. Although he seemed stronger than ever, his core was hollow, his foundation unstable. What he had was a mere illusion of power.

Both men knew this, so neither struck first. Yu Shi considered a potential alliance with the headmaster, weighing what would be higher, the cost or the benefit. The headmaster, meanwhile, offered Zhou Yuandao a pill. Zhou Yuandao shook his head.

The silence of their stalemate was shattered by two cries.

"Shixiong!"

"Shifu!"

Yin Biyue was the first voice. Among all present, he'd spotted the pale-faced Luo Mingchuan first. The second to cry out was Cheng Tianyu, who'd immediately seen his blood-drenched master.

Like a stone hitting still lake water, a tsunami-like sword intent flashed right at Yin Biyue's face. It was too fast to dodge. Yin Biyue couldn't even draw his sword before death's shadow descended.

Headmaster-xiansheng's form blurred and reappeared in the blink of an eye, interposing him in front of the blade. The sword clashed with one of his stone seals.

Boom!

Cracks spread across the seal. When matched with an opponent of almost equal strength, speed and power were impossible to balance. The target of Yu Shi's attack on Yin Biyue was actually Headmaster-xiansheng. He'd guessed correctly—the headmaster would save Yin Biyue.

In the next second, Yu Shi's smile froze on his face.

A sword pierced through him from behind, swift and light as a feather. At the last moment, his protective vital qi deflected the blade so it missed his heart and pierced his shoulder instead. He hadn't expected that Zhou Yuandao, so clearly at death's door, could still attack.

With this sudden shift, Headmaster-xiansheng's stone seal stabilized. It flipped in midair and forced Yu Shi back several paces.

The last thing Zhou Yuandao saw was the boyish Cheng Tianyu running toward him holding the Feiyu sword. It was like seeing his younger self. He thought of Song Tang and Zhong Shan, of how in this life, he'd seen the world, battled evil, and taught many disciples. He had no regrets.

"Shifu…"

Zhou Yuandao smiled. He wanted to reassure his disciple and say, *Your master will be going ahead first. Don't think of me. I'll leave the future in your hands. Screw up, and expect my sword sheath to hit your palms.*

But he was out of strength. His lips parted and uttered only a single word:

"Good."

Chapter 82

CHENG TIANYU STILL REMEMBERED the day he'd become a disciple many years ago. In the ceremony, he'd held a teacup over his head with both hands and called out "Master" with hopeful anticipation.

Zhou Yuandao had gazed at him solemnly and uttered a single word:

"Good."

Now, atop the mountain, Cheng Tianyu wept uncontrollably.

Having attained the Second Sage level through long years of cultivation, one's flesh and bones could serve as sources of energy. Zhou Yuandao's final act had been to transform his entire body into a sword. Countless beams of clear light spilled from his form, drifting through the air like a second shower of glittering feathers. When the light faded, the sea of blood receded, giving way to white clouds.

Not even a skeleton was left.

Headmaster-xiansheng, sensing what had transpired behind him, let out a sigh.

Cheng Tianyu, his eyes wet and reddened with rage, stood with his sword in hand. His aura rose steadily. Feiyu left its sheath with a mournful cry, cleaving a path dozens of feet wide through the clouds, its edge shooting straight for Yu Shi.

Yu Shi was caught facing enemies from the front and back—before him was Headmaster-xiansheng's stone seal, and behind a razor-sharp edge. He normally dismissed sword strikes of Cheng Tianyu's level. But tonight's tremendous expenditure, compounded by Zhou Yuandao's final strike, had left him far from his peak strength.

His eyes flickered as he closed them. His complexion was pallid.

Lin Yuangui staggered back a few steps and coughed up blood. Yu Shi had forcibly severed Lin Yuangui's connection to the protective array.

This was a last resort for which Yu Shi had to pay a steep price, but he needed the array's power to harness the energy of the natural world.

The mountain wind blew, and Rong Zhuo's crimson robes whipped back and forth, no longer dark as blood but bright as burning flames. Tempestuous demonic qi engulfed the mountaintop. Mentally, he was still in the depths of the Yunxing Abyss, trapped within the realm of Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net. Like red lotuses blooming in eternal night, fire erupted from him, burning the demonic beings in his mind to ashes.

Yin Biyue's sword momentum reached its pinnacle. The dazzling radiance of Broad Daylight sundered the dark night and struck Rong Zhuo, bringing the blinding light of day back to the mortal world. The Yihu sword resonated with its master, and its resounding cry reverberated across the Hengduan Mountains.

Just as Yu Shi took control of the array's power and opened his eyes once more, a sensation struck him. Choosing to endure the stone steal's blow, he swept his sleeve out and unleashed enormous might toward Yin Biyue.

"Hand over the Linyuan sword!"

Yin Biyue was startled. Peril now beset him, but it was too late to change the trajectory of his sword momentum. The blade pierced through the firelight blazing around Rong Zhuo and into his skin—yet stopped less than half an inch from his heart, unable to advance further.

Rong Zhuo's pupils constricted. He had forcibly broken free from the meditation realm of the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net. He lowered his eyes to stare at the sword's edge.

"Linyuan…"

Panic rising, Yin Biyue found his blade restrained by Rong Zhuo while Yu Shi's sword qi closed in from behind, only millimeters away—

Under death's shadow, Yin Biyue's world suddenly spun in a dizzying swirl. Headmaster-xiansheng had grabbed him by the collar.

Rather than take Yin Biyue flying, Headmaster-xiansheng tore through space with him and Luo Mingchuan in each hand.

They arrived instantly in the academy’s inner courtyard. Compared to the two times Yin Biyue had traveled using stamped letters, this had been even more impressive.

Though they were safe in the courtyard, Yin Biyue could still feel the chilling killing intent on his back. His heart thundered with lingering fear.

As soon as Headmaster-xiansheng released them, Yin Biyue caught hold of Luo Mingchuan. His shixiong had fallen unconscious, just like after battling Liaoguan at Xingshan Temple.

Headmaster-xiansheng slumped in his recliner chair and waved them away. Yin Biyue carried Luo Mingchuan to a side chamber.

While the Hengduan Mountains had been dark and starless, the academy’s night sky shimmered brilliantly. When Yin Biyue came back outside, he saw Headmaster-xiansheng leaning back against the bamboo recliner. Maybe it was his imagination, but the headmaster seemed to have aged quite a bit. Silver starlight fell upon him, completely whitening his locks.

It was no imagining, and Li Tugen was aware of his own condition. A hundred years ago, he’d been the only person to ever unravel the mysteries of space. This had been the first time he’d broken through it while carrying others. Moreover, at the last second, he’d also sent Cheng Tianyu back to the Qinglu Mountains with a palm strike. These acts had drained not only his cultivation, but his very life force.

Yin Biyue bowed.

Before he could say anything, Headmaster-xiansheng spoke in a raspy voice. “With Yu Shi badly wounded and cut off from the mountain protective array, he won’t dare leave Hengduan. He’ll need time to recover. Rong Zhuo was also gravely injured in the spiritual realm. It’ll take long-term planning for him to make a comeback.”

Yin Biyue frowned. They had bought some time, but the situation remained dire. Yu Shi might not be the only one colluding with demonic cultivators. While Rong Zhuo was severely wounded, he might have other plots. Yin Biyue didn’t press, however, and rose to pour the headmaster a cup of tea—Junshan Mist Tea, so casually given to Yin Biyue by his master when they were together on the Eastern Continent.

The clear brew rolled with steam and reflected the shimmering stars. Headmaster-xiansheng took a sip and let out a contented sigh, reinvigorated by the hot tea.

“You must have questions. Go ahead…”

The numerous upheavals of the day had left Yin Biyue’s thoughts in a tangled mess, and words spilled from his mouth almost without pause. “Are Yu Shi and Rong Zhuo deranged? My master reforged the Linyuan sword a long time ago. Only Chunshan Xiao and Qiufeng Li are left. If I had Linyuan, would I even—”

He stopped abruptly. A bad feeling dawned on him.

The headmaster looked at him gently like he would at any student asking a foolish question. “But Linyuan is right there with you.”

Thunderstruck, Yin Biyue slowly tilted his head to peer at the longsword on his waist. The silence in the room almost seemed to mock him for not realizing sooner the treasure he carried.

As a relic left behind by the True Immortal, the Linyuan sword held extraordinary significance. Years ago, there had even been rumors claiming that Wei Jingfeng had only become a Sage by obtaining this peerless divine weapon. It was said that the one who gained Linyuan gained the true meaning of the sword path—and the world.

“I assumed you knew,” Headmaster-xiansheng said matter-of-factly.

Still stunned, Yin Biyue shook his head. “Shifu never told me.”

“Oh. He must’ve forgotten.” Headmaster-xiansheng waved a hand. “Chunshan Xiao and Qiufeng Li were his own creations. Linyuan was forged from cosmic molten fire, and only such fire could melt it. Where would one find that nowadays? Just empty words to fool the likes of Yu Shi.”

Yin Biyue couldn’t care less about where to find molten fire! He just couldn’t come to terms with how his perfectly lovely Yihu had suddenly become Linyuan. How could his master possibly forget something that major?!

On second thought, it made sense. To his master, sleep was the most important thing, then there was everything else.

He replayed every scene in the past, magnifying the details: The terrible feeling he had when he first gripped the sword, his initial inability to infuse it with his vital qi, its resonant cries when it met strong foes, Liaoguan's shock and fury upon seeing it…

"What kind of sword is Yihu?"

"A divine weapon."

"Why did you give it to me?"

"I didn't. It chose you."

So his master had said in the wastelands.

When Yin Biyue studied the sword further, he suddenly found the names didn't matter anymore. Whether Yihu or Linyuan, it was his blade. Stripped of its outlandish legends, it was the sword he practiced with daily and fought with when needed. If the True Immortal Yi Lingxiao could use it to bring peace to the realm, he could also use it to slay demons—even though Yin Biyue might not have been as capable as Yi Lingxiao.

Another thought hit him. With Zhou Yuandao fallen, the number of Second Sages who could defend against the demonic path had dropped by one more. If word got out, it'd surely cause a stir in the Southern Continent.

"What of Qinglu Sword Sect—"

"Zhou Yuandao's three disciples are capable. It's up to them now…" Headmaster-xiansheng sighed, then changed the subject. "Our biggest problem is currently lying in that room. What does the rest matter when compared to him?"

Yin Biyue understood. No one knew when Luo Mingchuan would wake, or how he'd act when he did. Even though his shixiong had sealed off Liaoguan's cultivation, how could such tremendous power remain stable within him? This time, they weren't at Cangya under the watch of the Sword Sage. If the one to wake was the Demon Lord, or if Luo Mingchuan lost his mind, who in this world could stop him?

Nonetheless, Yin Biyue believed in Luo Mingchuan. Not because of circumstances. Just faith.

"There will be a way."

Headmaster-xiansheng chuckled at this. He rose from the chair and strolled toward the library. His voice carried through the quiet. “Truly Wei Jingfeng’s disciple. So like him.”

Yin Biyue fell silent. He considered his master’s disciples: Jun Yu shared his talent for the sword; Liu Qishuang matched his martial valiance; Yan Xing took after his free spirit and love of drink; and even Duan Chongxuan’s vanity mirrored his. What about Yin Biyue? How did he resemble his master?

If the Sword Sage were around, he’d declare, *Of course you resemble this old fellow! You’re handsome, just like me!*

Alas, no one was there to give Yin Biyue anything.

Standing alone in the courtyard, Yin Biyue watched as dawn’s first light broke on the eastern horizon. The transition from dark to light seemed instantaneous. The winter morning wind carried a biting chill. Daybreak at last. The endless night had passed.

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AT DAWN, A CARRIAGE DEPARTED the academy. Yin Biyue was taking Luo Mingchuan west. At his current cultivation level, with nonstop travel and crossing the sea on a lone boat, it’d only take three days to reach the Western Continent.

Eventually, they arrived at Panlong Ridge.

Already sparse in both spiritual energy and people during the summer, the ridge was even bleaker in the winter. Withered leaves carpeted the ground while harsh winds moaned, punctuated by the lonely cries of partridges and crows. No one would think they’d come here.

Yin Biyue prepared a cave, furnishing it with a bed, a table, meditation cushions, and even candlesticks. It reminded him of the way Duan Chongxuan had traveled with a complete set of furniture. The thought almost made him chuckle. While purchasing supplies in Yunyang City,

realizing they might occupy this cave indefinitely, comfort had seemed essential.

As he looked at the cave again now, it felt familiar. They might have stayed here for a night en route to the Flower-Plucking Tournament. At the time, he'd been uncomfortable with his shixiong being within three feet of him, his meditation disturbed all night.

After carefully settling Luo Mingchuan on the bed, Yin Biyue took out array flags and focused intently on installing a formation.

He had said there would be a way, so he wouldn't let Headmaster-xiansheng or anyone else share the risk.

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HALF A DAY LATER, Yin Biyue, pale-faced and beading with sweat, finally pricked his fingertip with vital qi and forced out a drop of heartblood to drip onto the cave's entrance.

Instantly, the nine array flags concealed their traces, and an invisible barrier coalesced. The roaring wind outside the cave quieted to a kitten's purr.

Yin Biyue let out a sigh of relief as a heavy burden lifted from his shoulders.

The array was complete, its energy linked to his life. Only his death could break it. Should Luo Mingchuan wake up delirious or worse, the array might not hold long. To leave, he would need to kill its creator first.

Now, he would wait here and watch over his shixiong until he woke.

Chapter 83

WORD OF THE GREAT BATTLE in the Hengduan Mountains spread across the five continents like wildfire. At first, many ordinary folks didn't believe it. They couldn't believe that Baopu Sect of the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects would collude with demonic cultivators—until the Qinglu Mountains flew white funeral banners over their peaks.

Over a hundred sects and prominent clans in the Southern Continent were affiliated with Qinglu Sword Sect. To them, the existence of a Second Sage was akin to a deity's. The news of Zhou Yuandao's death felt like the sky had collapsed, leaving everyone on edge.

As the junior sect leader, Song Tang rightfully succeeded as sect leader. However, within such a major sect, it was inevitable that some elders would harbor resentment and selfish intentions. The usually gentle Song Tang had no choice but to employ thunderous measures to suppress dissent. Fortunately, with Zhong Shan and Cheng Tianyu's staunch support, Qinglu Sword Sect avoided splitting like Lianjian Sect.

Headmaster-xiansheng closed his doors to recover from his injuries.

The Northern Continent's rebels remained unquelled.

The Buddhist cultivators secluded themselves deep in the mountains.

In such turbulent times, with internal and external troubles plaguing all sides, no one had the energy to condemn Baopu Sect outright. Moreover, news had come that Chu Huan had led a faction of Lianjian Sect to defect to the Hengduan Mountains, where they'd received an exceedingly generous allocation of resources.

Rong Zhuo returned to the Eastern Continent to unify the demonic cultivators, while Yu Shi recuperated from his injuries.

The situation was precariously balanced for the moment, yet everyone knew it was temporary. The peace was as fragile as spun glass and could shatter at any time.

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ASIDE FROM THE NINE PALACES and twelve temples swirling with incense smoke, Baopu Sect also had an ancestral hall. Tucked away in a remote corner, the hall was usually deserted save for a few disciples assigned to clean it.

The dimly lit hall with its faded draperies was packed today.

Inside the center of the hall, Yu Shi sat in an elegant taishi chair. Over a dozen elders stood at his sides. Facing them, ten feet away, was a stoic man cradling a sword.

“The sect raised you all these years. In your prime, *this* is how you repay its kindness? By turning traitor?!”

“If your master were still alive, how could you face him?!”

“Young people must recognize the times and bend to the greater good. You’re still young and ignorant. Heed your shishu. Do not ruin your future!”

Although the elders sounded harsh, they primarily spoke words of persuasion. No one mentioned punishment. They all knew that in terms of combat prowess, none of them could withstand a blow from Lin Yuangui.

No matter what the others said, Lin Yuangui remained silent.

His gaze passed through the crowd and rested on the aged memorial tablets. His thoughts drifted to the founder and past sect elders. If their spirits were truly in heaven, were they watching now?

No one else noticed, but Yu Shi could tell Lin Yuangui was distracted. He scowled. If he could avoid it, he didn’t want to kill Lin Yuangui—he still had value. With Zheng Wei dead and the remaining Baopu’s Seven useless, the sect’s younger generation had no second “New Moon Sword.” With his great endeavors underway, he needed talented men. Training a new one would take another hundred years.

Yu Shi’s gaze fell on someone in the crowd on his right.

Understanding, the man stepped forward with a warm smile.

“Lin-shixiong, I’ve long heard of your reputation and admired you just as long. Now that we’ve finally met, I see you truly live up to your name.”

The one to speak was Chu Huan. Years ago, he had made a pact with Rong Zhuo, and had waited a long time for this day. He knew he wasn’t important enough to be an ally to these prominent figures; he was a mere pawn. But there were greater things at stake than meaningless titles.

“Shixiong, your swordplay is unparalleled, but have you considered that the times are changing, the tides unstoppable?” Chu Huan continued, his tone shifting. “Turbulent times create heroes. The old order is destined to be discarded. Lin-shixiong, why not join us in establishing a new order? In creating a glorious new age? Great achievements outshine minor details. History is written by victors. Posterity will only remember our merits.”

Faced with such rousing words, even the elders’ white beards quivered and their eyes gleamed with fervor. A thrill coursed through them, compelling them to cheer—they, too, wished to usher in a new era. The racket went on for some time before it died.

At last, Lin Yuangui spoke. “We don’t share a master, nor are we in the same sect. To call me ‘Shixiong’ is undeserved.”

The atmosphere in the hall turned cold. Dumping a bucket of water into a brazier couldn’t have been more effective.

“And what of *me*?” Yu Shi growled. “I was your master’s shixiong. Can I admonish you? If not for your late master’s sake, I would have killed you long ago.”

The elders sighed and lamented among themselves that Lin Yuangui was ungrateful for the sect leader and his earnest efforts.

Despite his words, Yu Shi and Lin Yuangui’s master hadn’t shared the camaraderie of disciples. Baopu Sect had already been split into the old and new factions at the time. Yu Shi and Lin Yuangui’s master had each led one. After Lin Yuangui’s master had accidentally died during seclusion, Yu Shi had become sect leader and purged any dissent to rule unchallenged.

Yu Shi rose and left with a swirl of silk. He couldn't afford his blood boiling in his chest when he was still recovering from injuries. Any further discussion would waste his breath further.

His voice carried back: "The situation is set, with or without you. Think carefully." The crowd followed him out and vanished swiftly.

Lin Yuangui was left to gaze at his master's memorial tablet in the empty ancestral hall.

The dim candlelight stretched his shadow across the ground.

***

AT FIRST, YIN BIYUE FOUND TIME agonizingly slow. He wasn't actually carefree or brave. Staring at the array at the entrance of the cave, he'd sometimes lapse into unease. Other times, he focused solely on Luo Mingchuan or talked to himself, recounting every event since their meeting. He talked of the Cangya Dungeon, of the rooftops in Ye City, of the shrine at Xingshan Temple, of the Floating Sea. As he spoke, he gradually calmed. Though he knew his shixiong couldn't hear him, he found comfort in voicing these memories. It reassured him.

Yin Biyue began meditating or practicing the sword inside his mind. With his thoughts tranquil and undistracted, it was just like seclusion on Xihua Peak.

Not today.

When dawn's first light entered the cave, someone was at the entrance beneath the morning rays. He seemed to stand amid the clouds. His features were transcendent, his robes free of dust, and a sword was strapped to his back. He showed neither sorrow nor joy, and emanated neither aura nor might.

Yin Biyue's qi was linked to the cave's array; he sensed every rustle of grass. Yet this man had appeared out of thin air, as if the array didn't exist. That was terrifying. It meant this man's power was beyond this world's comprehension. Strangely, Yin Biyue felt no wariness or urge to

resist. He had no words for the feeling. He'd never met an immortal before, but if they existed, Yin Biyue imagined this man was how they were—coming and going as they pleased, belonging wherever they stood.

The immortal took a few steps forward, his eyes on Yin Biyue. When he spoke, his words were not addressed to Yin Biyue, but to someone in another world entirely.

"I've found the client."

Yin Biyue was taken aback.

The man smiled—even his smile was like wintry plum blossoms—and slowly said, "Heaven's King Covers Earthly Tiger…"

"The author is an idiot!"

Yin Biyue only realized what he'd blurted after he'd spoken. He was thunderstruck. A tidal wave of "holy shit." crashed across his mental screen.

What! Kind of world! Is this?!

The supremely badass immortal became a fellow countryman in zero seconds flat! (╥﹏╥)

"Should be 'the tech department are idiots'…" the man muttered to himself. "Ahem. How may I call you, sir?"

"I'm Yin Biyue."

"Mister Yin. My name is Cheng."

Recalling the man's first words, Yin Biyue now knew where he'd come from: that rebirth company that sold counterfeit halos.

Is he here for after-sales support?! With such a wide power gap, will I get killed if I complain the halo is bad? Shixiong, save me. (˚ ˃̣̣̥⌓˂̣̣̥)づ

"Mister Cheng, are you here to—"

"I'm here to apologize on behalf of our tech department. I'm sorry that the halo's installation error has ruined your user experience. I am glad to discuss compensation for the inconvenience with you." Although his words were simple and brief, they were sincere without a trace of condescension.

Yin Biyue contemplated for a moment. “Installation error? What error?”

“You were installed with a halo contrary to your original order. If you still want to be a villain, I can replace it immediately.”

Contrary to his original order.

Yin Biyue finally understood how the past bizarre developments had happened. The wrong halo had ruined his ability to quietly act cool. Had this been when he’d first arrived in this world, he would have swapped out the halo for certain. But now, after a long silence, he shook his head. “No need. I don’t want any halo at all. Please deactivate the one on me too.”

“Certainly. Now, let’s discuss compensation.”

“What can you offer?”

“An answer to a question, a free hack, a foretelling of your fate, a forecast for good or bad luck, or a love prediction… You may pick two of the above.”

Um, the supposed compensation sounds more like shady street fortune-telling?

“Will my shixiong turn into the Demon Lord?”

The man glanced at Luo Mingchuan, then at the Linyuan sword in Yin Biyue’s hand.

“As long as you don’t kill him with that sword, no. When Mo Changyuan died by this blade, he left a wisp of his will within it using the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net. Should that will enter your shixiong’s soul, memories of a million years ago will awaken inside him. In that case, he will become Mo Changyuan.”

Yin Biyue stared dumbly at his sword. He’d never imagined that it’d be like this.

The illusion from the shrine at Xingshan Temple resurfaced. He had killed his shixiong, then the scene had turned to a stranger inside a great hall. It had felt so real.

“The power of good in the sword is enough to suppress that will. Given time, the will can only dissipate.”

Yin Biyue breathed a sigh in relief.

“That counts as an answer to a question. Would you like to make your second selection?”

Yin Biyue’s mind was a mess. Sitting by Luo Mingchuan’s bed, eyes fixed on his sleeping figure, he didn’t know what to do. For some reason, he just wanted to talk.

“You’ve also traveled many worlds, right? Was there one that made you feel like you’re truly alive? Have you met anyone who gave you courage but also made you think too much? I don’t know what’s happening to me. Does that count as another question?”

That isn’t a question with an answer, Cheng Xiaobai thought. *You’re asking about love.*

“Love makes one anxious and strange.”

Yin Biyue was startled. He wanted to say, *This is my shixiong. I’d never harbor impure thoughts about him,* but the words stuck in his throat.

Cheng Xiaobai could tell what he was thinking.

“Someone once told me that when you love someone, whether they were man or woman, human or monster, immortal or demon, it doesn’t matter. You just want to be with them, to protect them, to spend a long life together. Is that how it is with you…?”

Spend a long life…with Luo Mingchuan.

Yes.

In the midst of his shock, Yin Biyue also felt anxious and confused.

Is that how it is? Do I really love him?

“Choosing two answers is such a waste. Do you have any additional compensation requests?”

“No.”

“You may refuse, but company policy requires me to offer anyway. Contact me if you change your mind.”

A talisman appeared in Yin Biyue’s hand, one with strange patterns he’d never seen before.

“I can’t stay or the Universe’s laws will detect me. You can use this talisman to reach me, but it will only work once.” The morning light pierced through the man’s form and rendered it translucent. It was a mystical sight.

“Finally, I must caution you that while he won’t wake up as the Demon Lord, his mind may be confused. Be prepared.”

With that, the figure vanished from the cave entrance.

Yin Biyue knew the warning was well-intentioned. The sealed cultivation within his shixiong might burst; the Nine Revolutions of Heavenly Net could lose control. The situation was still dangerous. He also imagined his shixiong waking up and cutting him down.

A long time passed before he bent down in front of Luo Mingchuan. His voice echoed in the empty cave.

“I’m not afraid to die. I’m only afraid that my next world won’t have you in it.”

The man on the bed opened his eyes.

Bonus Story:
Sword Sage

THE CREAKING OF CARRIAGES, the shouts of street vendors, the alluring string music, the cries of children—all faded into the thick veil of night. This was the fourth consecutive night of snow in Yunyang City.

On such a night, there was no clear moonlight to shine upon vermilion gates, no emerald-green wine cups, and no crimson dancing skirts. The tedious and piercing sound of broken branches collapsing under the weight of dense snow and the howl of wind through alleyways mingled with the crisp chime of silver bells that hung under upturned eaves.

The swirling curtain of snow, pushed high by the north wind before it could touch the ground, blotted out the sky and crashed like waves onto bluestone-tiled streets. The accumulated snow on the streets was diligently swept away by servants of the major households during the day, but with night fallen it piled thick once more. Another laborious task awaited them at daybreak.

In a city accustomed to favorable weather and extravagant prosperity, this once-in-a-century snowfall was remarkable. The homes of the rich and noble were indeed full of excessive wine and meat, of course, but the frozen corpses of those who'd died from starvation were also a rare sight in this place. In a city of plenty, even beggars and stray cats had enough. Who didn't have a bridge arch to shelter from the snow or a pile of straw to block the chill wind?

The soft crunch of footsteps in snow echoed down the desolate, miles-long street. They approached with a strange rhythm, neither hurried nor slow. The one traveling through the storm on this night didn't sound like an anxious soul returning home, but rather like a rambling passerby. The bright yellow lanterns hanging beneath vermilion eaves beat against the white walls behind them in the wind. The swaying, dim light cast a golden hue upon the snow mounds and created the illusion of warmth. It also illuminated the figure of the passerby.

He was a youth in white robes with a white fur cloak draped over them, and his brocade boots embroidered with cloud patterns showed beneath them. He held an azure oilpaper umbrella trimmed in gold. A longsword swayed at his slender waist with every step, as if it were merely an exquisite ornament.

He trod on top of the snow. The heavy accumulation that should have swallowed his ankles only left shallow imprints beneath his boots. Following the wall past the vermilion front gates of one residence, he reached the deepest corner, where the wailing wind and trembling shadows of trees were still. In the dead angle the lanterns could not reach crouched a small, huddled shadow.

The shadow—a young boy—looked up. After a fleeting glance at the newcomer, he lowered his head again. The newcomer stopped, as if he had discovered something interesting. Perhaps traveling alone on a snowy night was simply too lonely. He studied the thin child before him, barely more than skin and bones.

The child had half a straw mat wrapped around his tattered cotton robe. He'd pressed himself into the corner in an attempt to conserve warmth and energy. On a night like this, even fox fur and warm quilts were barely enough to ward off the cold. It was impossible to know how long the child had been here. Dark circles shadowed his eyes and his breathing was faint. Even if he could maintain consciousness now, he might quietly fade away if he stayed like this for even a few more hours.

The newcomer felt no pity, but a thought struck him. When he spoke, his voice carried the hoarseness unique to adolescents. "You want to enter Lanyuan Academy?"

The child frowned. Speaking was a tremendous waste of energy for him, but he remembered that ignoring a question was very rude. He knew how to save energy, however, and the words he breathed were but whisper-soft, weak and brief.

"Yes."

The newcomer smiled. "This old fellow is Wei Jingfeng. Want to become my disciple?"

There was no one who didn’t know the name Wei Jingfeng, and no one who would dare falsely claim it—even if the person before him looked like a gallivanting young noble. But who said the Sword Sage couldn’t be a young noble? The name alone could alter the heavens and earth. Unfortunately, on this night, in this place, the only listeners were this child and the endless snow. There would be no moving, tearful scenes.

The child ignored the man’s incongruent self-address. He didn’t even lift his eyelids. Instead, he asked, “What’s in it for me?”

Wei Jingfeng found this amusing. No one had asked him such a question in years. He didn’t laugh, though, because the child was serious—he genuinely didn’t know what benefits there might be.

He thought for a moment, then answered the boy with great gravity. “If you seek power, as my disciple, you will rise to the rank of Imperial Preceptor and wield overwhelming authority, obtain wealth rivaling nations, and become the object of worship for millions. Countless will kneel at your feet like ants, begging you for a mere glance…”

The child said nothing, still curled against the wall in his energy-saving posture.

Wei Jingfeng continued on. “If you seek cultivation, then ascend the Cangya Mountains and cultivate the finest sword arts. You will become incomparably strong. People will revere and fear you, for on a whim, you could lay waste to millions and dye rivers red with blood. You could dictate life and death, and none would dare criticize you.”

Crack.

A branch of green calyx plum snapped under the weight of snow. The snowstorm had intensified, but regardless of how the wind blew and the snow fell, Wei Jingfeng heard the child’s reply clearly.

“No.”

This answer, given without much thought but with sufficient conviction, left him surprised and perplexed. “Why not? Whatever Lanyuan Academy can give you, I can give you a hundredfold.”

The child really didn’t want to speak again, but politeness demanded an answer. “They provide meals there.”

“Ha ha ha!” Wei Jingfeng threw his head back and laughed. The sound echoed to the skies, shook the snow from the eaves, and set the withered plum branches to trembling. When his laughter subsided, he seemed to be in an excellent mood.

“I can also provide meals,” he said.

The child finally looked up. His dark eyes stared hard at Wei Jingfeng, as if he was assessing the credibility of this meal-provision claim.

Wei Jingfeng nearly stamped his foot. “I am the esteemed Sword Sage, you know! Would I lie to you? Do you know how many people beg to __”

“Okay.”

Wei Jingfeng stopped. The child grabbed the hem of his wide sleeve.

When that bony little hand had reached for him, he’d nearly lashed out with lethal force, but he’d forced down the urge. No one had touched him for years; the sensation was foreign to him. Those who saw him either revered him or feared him, keeping a respectful distance. Those who’d tried to come near him were assassins, and they’d all died.

The frail child used his grip on Wei Jingfeng’s sleeve to shakily pull himself up. Then he let go, leaving a grimy handprint on the white fur. The child looked at the stain for a moment.

“Sorry.”

Wei Jingfeng regretted this. Not because of his rash decision to take a disciple, but because he didn’t know how to respond. No one had ever apologized to him before. In his centuries of life, he had never learned how to converse peacefully with others. He tried, but his words were always mistaken for provocation or disdain, which inevitably led to drawn swords. In the end, he always had to defeat or kill the other party.

Just now, for example. His words had simply been honest. It never occurred to him that to another’s ears, it might have sounded like condescending pity. He genuinely didn’t know how to interact with people…or rather, with a disciple.

What was he supposed to say at a time like this?

“It’s fine.” Right. He was the master. He couldn’t let his disciple see his social ineptitude.

The child fell silent too. He was also unsure of what to say next. *Greetings, Shifu? I pay respects to Shifu?* What happened when others accepted disciples? He didn’t know.

In truth, he had walked all the way from the distant northern wastelands to Yunyang City in the Central Plains, barely speaking along the way.

The mute servant who’d once cared for him was long gone. With her last breath, she’d urged him to go to the capital of the Central Continent, Yunyang City, to see the world—if possible, to find an academy to learn skills. He’d buried the old woman, packed his only two shirts, and set off. His scant silver ran out before he reached Yunyang. Because he was young and ate too much, even with his unusual strength, few places would hire him. Most academies charged a hefty tuition, which he couldn’t afford. However, in recent weeks, the bustling Yunyang City had been even more crowded than usual. He’d heard that Lanyuan Academy was about to open its doors to new disciples. What a wonderful school—no tuition, free meals, a chance to see the world and gain skills.

Of course, he hadn’t been waiting here the whole time. He’d stayed on an abandoned boat until a few days ago, when he heard the academy’s entrance exams were near. That was when he’d come to wait by the gates. Even now, he didn’t understand the strange expressions on people’s faces when he asked how to enroll in the school. They looked at him with disbelief and mockery. *Someone like you wants to enter the academy?* those faces said.

He didn’t get it. Would eating too much disqualify him? He could try eating less…

In the end, he believed what others had told him: “The academy accepts disciples in order of arrival.”

So he’d waited in this corner for three days. He figured others would come to wait too. There had to be a line, right? Before the academy gates opened, Wei Jingfeng had arrived instead.

An awkward mood settled between them. Evidently, this was the most socially inept master-disciple pair in history.

Wei Jingfeng held the umbrella over the child's head. After some thought, he took off his fur cloak and draped it over the child's shoulders. This was how a master should act…right?

The oversized fox fur dragged behind the child like the trailing robes of northern nobility. The child shifted, finding it cumbersome to walk like this, but it was certainly very warm.

Holding the umbrella with one hand, Wei Jingfeng held the child's hand in the other and slowed his pace.

"What's your name?"

"Jun Shier."

"The disciple of the Sword Sage can't be called something as unremarkable as '*twelfth*'!" The young noble frowned in thought. "Yu, meaning '*brilliance*'—an exuberance of light. From now on, you'll be Jun Yu… What a fantastic name!"

He withdrew his gaze from the *Yuhe Bakery* sign.

Jun Yu had no objections. To him, a name was just a label. Few people had ever called him by his name anyway, so he had little concept of its significance.

The young noble held the umbrella, leading the child by hand.

Two figures, one tall and one small, gradually disappeared into the distance. As night deepened, the endless snowstorm swallowed their silhouettes.

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THE LONE BOAT rocked gently on the Minchuan River like a leaf adrift as the night rain fell. Inside the cabin, a dim lamp flickered. Two men sat across from each other, the warmed wine on the table long gone cold. The young noble polished his sword with rapt focus.

"Even if you master the Dao to heaven's limits, you can't have everything your way. True freedom and ease don't exist. You don't understand this now, just as those who don't study the sword can never understand its principles. You might have to wait until you encounter something you're unwilling to let go of to understand…"

That was true. Yin Biyue *didn't* understand. To him, his discount-store shifu was the most carefree, unbridled person in the world. "What does 'unwilling to let go' mean?"

Wei Jingfeng pondered the question, then decided to give an example.

"In my youth, whether I held an umbrella, wine, or silver, I always kept one hand free. Do you know why?"

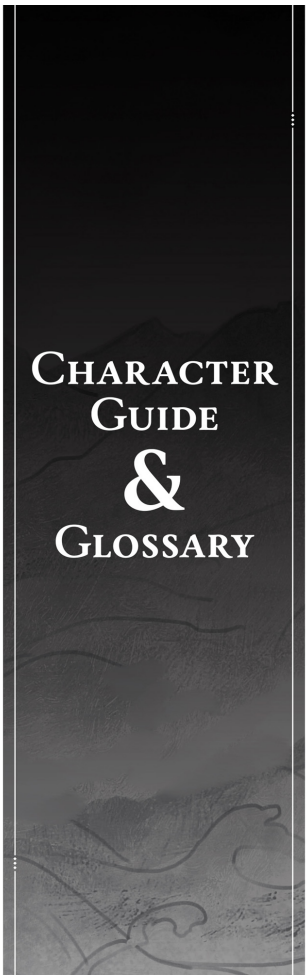
Yin Biyue considered that. "An empty hand lets you draw your sword at any moment?"

Wei Jingfeng smiled approvingly. "Correct! Without a hand ready to wield my sword, I'd feel uneasy. It'd bother me to no end!"

His gaze drifted to the river dappled by rain, as if looking into the distant past. His voice softened. "The first time I met your dashixiong, it was snowing so hard. Flakes as big as fists veiled the sky… He couldn't walk steadily. I held the umbrella with one hand and him with the other. With no third hand free, how could I hold my sword?

"Yet I wasn't bothered in the least. Holding his hand and keeping the umbrella steady was enough. It was many years later that I realized that was what it meant to be unwilling to let go."

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Villain's White Halo
VOLUME 3


Character
Guide
&
Glossary

Character Guide

XIANXIA

This story is primarily set in a xianxia world. Xianxia is a fantasy genre that heavily features Daoist themes of cultivation and the pursuit of immortality with more emphasis on the supernatural than martial arts. Its characters often strive to become stronger through cultivation, obtaining higher and higher cultivation levels, the fearsome powers of which are defined differently by each author.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

YIN BIYUE 殷璧越: A soul that has transmigrated to countless worlds as an insignificant villain. He's decided to live a peaceful life in his current world.

LUO MINGCHUAN 洛明川: A kindhearted man who has grown close to Yin Biyue. He is the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains and Xiqian Peak.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE REBIRTH COMPANY

CHENG XIAOBAI 程小白: An employee of the Rebirth Company.

LIU XIAODAI 刘小呆: An employee of the Rebirth Company who made a deal with Yin Biyue.

ZHANG QINGQING 张清清: The sales department head of the Rebirth Company.

THE CANGYA MOUNTAINS

DUAN CHONGXUAN 段崇轩: The chatty fifth disciple of Xihua Peak.

HE YANYUN 何嫣芸: Luo Mingchuan's younger martial sister from Xiqian Peak.

ELDER CHENG 程长老: The peak lord of Xiping Peak.

JUN YU 君煜: The stoic chief disciple of Xihua Peak.

LIU QISHUANG 柳欺霜: The martial-arts-focused second disciple of Xihua Peak.

RUAN XIAOLIAN 阮小莲: A food-loving disciple who is He Yanyun's friend.

WEI JINGFENG 卫惊风: The renowned Sword Sage and the peak lord of Xihua Peak. Absent.

YAN XING 燕行: The wayward third disciple of Xihua Peak who wields a changdao.

ZHENGYANGZI 正阳子: The sect leader and the peak lord of Xiqian Peak.

OTHER SECTS/FACTIONS

CHEN YI 陈逸: A disciple of Lianjian Sect who wields the changdao.

CHENG TIANYU 程天羽: The child prodigy of Qinglu Sword Sect, called the "Featherflight Sword."

CHU HUAN 褚浣: A disciple of Lianjian Sect and a spiritual cultivator.

HEADMASTER-XIANSHENG 掌院先生 (LI TUGEN 李土根): A Second Sage who presides over Lanyuan Academy.

HE LAI 何来: A disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked fifth in the "Baopu Seven."

MASTER JINGHAI 净海: The abbot of Xingshan Temple.

MASTER JINGYUN 净云: The chief sermonizer of Xingshan Temple.

LI LIN 李麟: A disciple of Baopu Sect. Nicknamed the “Little Bully of the Hengduan Mountains.”

LIAOGUAN 了观: A monk from the Age of Sages known as the Master of All Paths.

LIAOWANG 了望: Liaoguan’s younger martial brother and a former abbot of Xingshan Temple.

LIN YUANGUI 林远归: The chief disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked first in the “Baopu Seven.”

LUAN TWO 鸾二: A cyan-winged luan bird kept by the Northern Continent Emperor.

QU DUIYAN 曲堆烟: The beautiful daughter of Lianjian Sect’s leader and the Second Sage Qu Jiang.

QU JIANG 曲江: The Second Sage of Lianjian Sect and Qu Duiyan’s father.

SONG TANG 宋棠: The junior sect leader of Qinglu Sword Sect with a grudge against Yan Xing.

WANG XI 王禧: Captain of the Imperial Guard of the Northern Continent Empire.

YE ZHIQIU 叶之秋: The city master of Ye City.

YI LINGXIAO 让意凌: The True Immortal who killed the Demon Lord Mo Changyuan.

YU SHI 余世: The Second Sage of Baopu Sect, the second strongest cultivator in the world after the Sword Sage.

ZHENG WEI 郑渭: A disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked second of the “Baopu Seven.”

ZHONG SHAN 钟山: A disciple of Qinglu Sword Sect, called the “Tempest Sword.”

ZHOU YUANDAO 周远道: The Second Sage of Qinglu Sword Sect.

DEMONIC CULTIVATORS

MO CHANGYUAN 莫长渊: The Demon Lord who ruled the Demonic Dominion during the Age of Sages.

RONG ZHUO 容濯: An Omen-level demonic cultivator and the Qiong Palace Master.

YU ZHANMEI 玉展眉: The Jin Palace Master. A beautiful and deadly demonic cultivator.

Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIFU: Teacher or master. Literal meaning is “martial father.” For one’s master in one’s own sect.

SHIBO: Martial uncle. Used for someone who is older than one’s master.

SHISHU: Martial uncle. For junior martial siblings of the speaker’s master, including women.

SHIZHI: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker’s martial sibling.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SEQUENCING: When there is more than one sect member under the same teacher, seniority is determined by when one joined the sect. Immediate martial siblings address each other using sequential numbers according to seniority rather than by direct names. The eldest is given “Da,” then “Er” for second-oldest, and so on.

Example: Yin Biyue is the fourth disciple on Xihua Peak. His shixiong and shijie refer to him as “Sishidi.” His shidi, Duan Chongxuan, refers to him as “Sishixiong.”

1: Da

2: Er

3: San

4: Si

5: Wu

Other

DAOYOU: A fellow peer of the Dao.

GONGZI: A young man from an affluent household.

XIANSHENG: A term of address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

Glossary

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

CROWNING CEREMONY: The ceremony marking the coming-of-age for boys at the age of twenty, when they are conferred a "crown."

CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also attaining personal strength. Each stage of their enlightenment is called 'level' or 'state.'

The levels in this novel are:

Qi Cultivation

Marrow Purification

Spirit Concentration

Breakthrough

Small Ascension

Great Ascension

Second Sage

Sage

Immortal

DHARMA NAME: A new name given to monks during their Buddhist initiation rituals. It serves as a symbol of severing any ties to the physical world.

DRAGON VEIN: Underground channels of natural spiritual energy that flow through mountain ranges.

DUAL CULTIVATION: A method of cultivation wherein two cultivators cultivate together by having sex.

HAND SEAL: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells or while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, similar to a bloodstream. Some medical and combat techniques target the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints, which allows them to redirect, manipulate, or halt qi circulation. Halting a cultivator's qi circulation prevents them from using their internal cultivation until the block is lifted. Most cultivators have a single spiritual meridian, but more advanced cultivators may have more.

QI: Qi is the energy in all living things. Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation. Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual senses to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

VITAL QI: The essential life force cultivated to use as power.

SEA OF CONCEPTION: Also known as the conception vessel or dantian, it is the core in which qi is conceived. It is located in the bowel area.

QI DEVIATION: Refers to a situation where one's cultivation enters a perilous, highly volatile state. This is usually the result of using risky, incorrect, or high-level cultivation techniques that are beyond the practitioner's ability to handle, but can also be triggered by unstable emotions or overtaxing oneself in battle. Qi deviation is heavily damaging to the body and comes with the risk of death.

SECLUSION: Also known as "closed-door meditation," seclusion or secluded cultivation is when a cultivator isolates themselves from the rest of the world to meditate and further their internal cultivation. Often used to heal injuries or take cultivation to the next level.

SOLAR TERM: Refers to the twenty-four periods that reflect a change in season in accordance with an astronomical event or natural phenomenon.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with incantations written on them, often using cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

Footnotes

Chapter 45

[1] “Feelings While Ill” by Li Yu, Southern Tang Dynasty.

[2] Attack names, but also verses from “Seventh of the Eight Songs in the Longevity Music Score Upon the Imperial Palace in the Winter – Granting the Third Cup of Wine to Ministers” by Yang Yi, Song Dynasty. The Purple Pole is where Daoist immortals live in heaven.

Chapter 51

[3] As fuck.

Chapter 56

[4] “Gathas on the Transmission of Teachings of the Seven Buddhas - Verse of Vipasyin Buddha,” recorded by Shi Zisheng, Song Dynasty.

[5] An ancient Chinese strategy game still popular throughout East Asia where black and white stones are placed around a board to claim territory. Commonly known as Go in English.

Chapter 67

[6] “Wind and Rain” by Li Shangyin, Tang Dynasty.

Chapter 68

[7] An immortal being that reached the highest level of cultivation in Daoism.

Chapter 70

[8] A Buddhist cosmology concept; a universe where a thousand worlds each contain a thousand worlds, then those worlds each contain another thousand worlds.

[9] The first line is a secret mafia code from a Chinese novel that became a meme used to suss out scammers. The second line (the code's 'answer') changes depending on context.

[10] "The Autumn Wind" by Emperor Liu Che, Han Dynasty.

[11] Pai gow is an ancient gambling game played with dominoes.

Chapter 72

[12] A common name for ancient baijiu, a strong, clear liquor. Shaodaozi means "burning knife."

Chapter 73

[13] From "Partridge Sky: Send-off" by Xin Qiji, Song Dynasty.

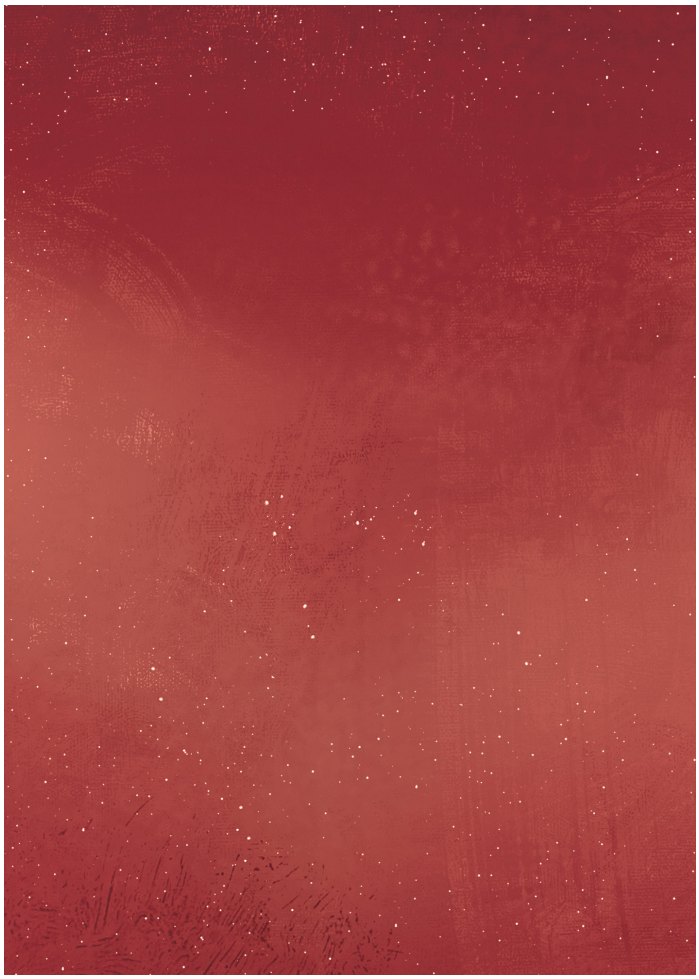
[14] From "Wind and Rain" by Li Shangyin, Tang Dynasty. "Blue towers" is a common poetic allusion to brothels or entertainment houses such as Chunxiu Pavilion.

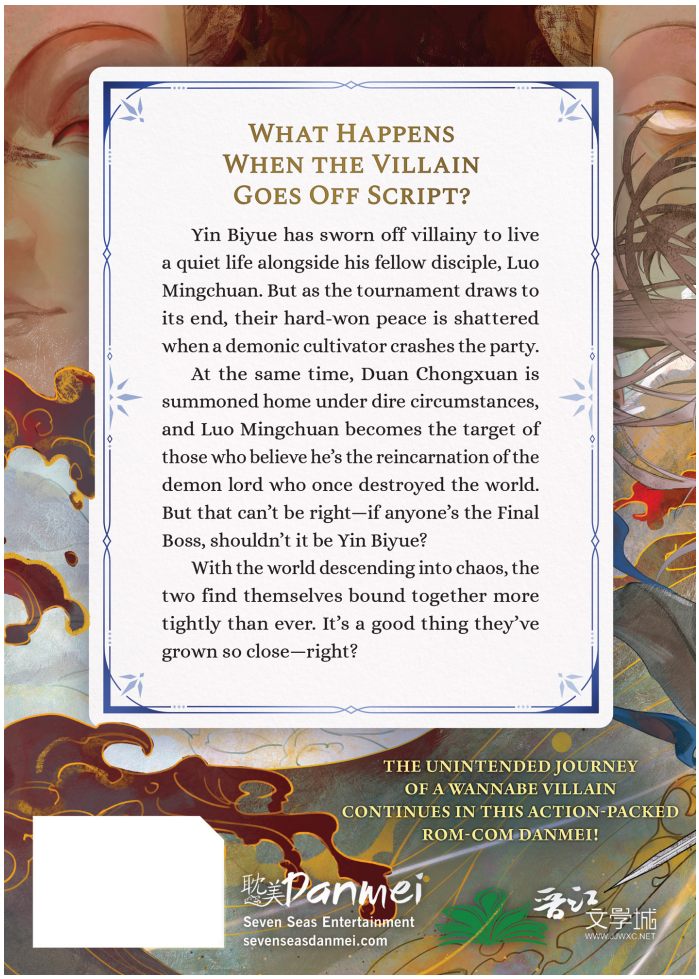
Chapter 74

[15] "Remembering Loved Ones While Moongazing" by Zhang Jiuling, Tang Dynasty.

Chapter 76

[16] Between nine and eleven p.m.

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